

How the school rascal grew up to become Sarawak's DAP boss
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BY RITA JONG

As he sat deep into a dark brown rattan chair, he spoke in a relaxed manner in a deep voice, like the way one would speak to a close friend.

Chong Chieng Jen is the name Malaysians recognise most for recently alleging that the near daily shootings in the country are part of a drama by the Barisan Nasional (BN) government to soften the ground for a new law to replace the repealed Emergency Ordinance.

An extraordinary claim from an elected politician, even by Malaysian standards, which earned him reprimands from the ruling powers.

Chong, 42, is also the Sarawak DAP chairman who had recently taken over from his predecessor Wong Ho Leng, who is unwell. From the get-go, he has been assailing his state's chief minister Tan Sri Taib Mahmud for alleged corrupt practices.

Yet, when The Malaysian Insider met him at a boutique hotel in Kuala Lumpur recently, the first impression he imprints, with his thin black rectangular glasses sitting on the bridge of his nose, is an epitome of your "guy next door", a little bit shy with an innocent face.

But not a little bit reticent on how he became a politician in the first place. Ask him this question, and he lets fly like a dog after a bone.

"I never had a childhood ambition. You can say I was like an 'accidental politician' who was thrown into the field without being given an option," said Chong who sports an unshaven look as he flashed a smile showing a neat set of teeth.

He laughed as he related how he got involved in politics. Referring to a meeting between the senior leader of his party, Lim Kit Siang, and Chong's father who was in politics, he says, "I was 28 years old when Kit came to see my father. Kit missed his flight to Sibu, so my dad and I went to meet him at a hotel in Kuching.

"They spoke until about 3am and at the end of their conversation, I suddenly found myself being thrown into politics. They didn't even persuade me!"

Chong adds, "I never thought or spoke of politics before. I was never in the student union in university and I don't like uniformed groups. In fact, politics was the last segment of the news that I would read in the newspaper."

A father of three, Chong said he soon began to find that "being a politician was not so bad after all". It gives him the opportunity to meet people and correct wrongs in society.

"I was never that smart nor was I a cool kid in school. In fact, I was naughty, the rascal who would get into fights," he confides.

Putting his hands together so his fingers meet, Chong says he had got into several fights in Form 1 while he was studying in Kuching. His father had to send him to St Patrick Secondary School and then to Victoria Junior College's boarding school in Singapore, where

he stayed for six years before pursuing his degree in Australia National University, Canberra.

He holds a double degree in law and commerce, but says that despite being sent away to boarding school, he continued his wild ways as a student.

"I would sneak out of boarding house with my friends and just 'lepak'," he said with a wry smile as he remembered his younger days in Singapore. "Even during my university days, I would go to the pubs drinking and staying up late."

But even as the wild child, Chong still had his priorities straight.

"I knew education was important so I would still study and make sure I did well in my exams. I also decided to become a lawyer because my dad was a lawyer and he wanted to have someone take over the family business."

He was born in Kuching and moved to Sibu until he was aged 9, before moving back to Kuching again. Chong's father, Siew Chiang, 74, is still a practising lawyer and a DAP state committee member. His mother, Sim Yaw Sik, 70, used to help out at his dad's law firm.

He has an older sister who works in Kuching as an accountant, and a younger sister who is married in Melbourne.

"I met my wife, Grace Tan, while she was working at my father's law firm. She's a lawyer too. So you can see, I didn't go very far," he said as he laughed aloud when he spoke of his wife of 15 years.

He loves sports. He plays basketball and badminton with his children, a boy aged 12 and two girls, aged 10 and 9, most evenings after work. But this 169cm-tall man who weighs 87kg, figures he needs to lose some weight.

So what's the secret to staying happy and sane in the dirty world of politics?

"We have to be happy-go-lucky to stay alive in politics," he declared, as he threw his hands on the armrest. - August 25, 2013.

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