

GenerationGrit

Wrestler grabs hold of life after troubled past

National wrestler Danielle Lim was just 17 when she plucked up the courage to call the police after her elder brother came home with drugs. Things at home and school were difficult but a remark from a teacher helped turn her life around.

Jolene Ang

He was constantly stealing from his family members, be it a cellphone, a laptop or even hard-earned savings, and then one day he brought drugs home.

That was the last straw for national wrestler Danielle Lim, who finally plucked up the courage to report her elder brother to the police five years ago. Ms Lim, 22, said: "My younger sister, who was 12 then, was at home and I didn't want her to see him taking drugs."

Her brother, who is four years older, was her hero and she looked up to him. Reporting him to the authorities in 2015 was a decision that took courage and conviction.

Growing up, the two older siblings were close. Their father had a fiery temper, inflamed by alcoholism, and was abusive towards his wife and three children.

Ms Lim said her brother always tried his best to shield her from the beatings, and bore the brunt of their father's anger whenever possible. The littlest things triggered their father. Once, when Ms Lim was about eight, she was squabbling with her brother over some jelly they had dropped on the floor.

"Dad told us to lick the jelly off the floor, and go downstairs to the basketball court and stand there as punishment, even though it was raining really heavily," she said.

Such incidents brought the two siblings closer. In those days, when she was in St Anthony's Canossian Primary School, she would skip school to hang out with him.

In 2005, her father left the family. Her mother, a Filipino who is on a long-term social visit, passed, worked at places such as Dunkin' Donuts to support herself and the children.

They lived in a four-room flat in Chai Chee and the neighbours helped her family get through the rough patch, Ms Lim said. "What we had wasn't enough, but our neighbours would often cook for us. We are really very grateful to them."

But Ms Lim and her brother were still skipping school.

Later, in St Anthony's Canossian Secondary School, she was consistently at the bottom of her cohort, though she was an active student athlete who represented the school in sports, including track and field and handball. "I didn't care. I went for my exams without knowing what paper I was sitting. The only reason I even took the exams was that I didn't want to have to spend money on a medical certificate if I was absent."

Life carried on this way until she was 16. "At first, it was all about fun. I had no aims or goals and I didn't know what I wanted in life. Breaking the rules made me feel there was something in my life I could have control over," she said.



Ms Danielle Lim, who has won six medals in wrestling competitions overseas, was once consistently at the bottom of her cohort in secondary school. She managed to turn things around thanks to her teachers' help and is now a student at the Singapore Institute of Technology. She hopes to represent Singapore at the SEA Games and Asian Games, as well as, one day, the Olympic Games. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

But when her brother joined a gang, she became afraid. "I started to think of the consequences of his actions. He became numb – he never felt bad about hitting someone."

When she tried to talk to him, they ended up quarrelling. "After that, he turned his back on me. My brother was my hero. But he became someone I didn't recognise any more," she said.

A remark from a teacher in 2014 served as a wake-up call for her. "My teacher said that if just a little of the effort I put into sports went to my studies, I would do well."

Ms Lim decided to try but the N levels were just two weeks away. "It was crazy. Everyone was studying so hard. They had all already completed their 10-year series books, when I had not even bought one."

She sought her teachers' help. Every day, she arrived at school when it opened at 5.30am and stayed until the gates closed. Her efforts paid off and she passed with 18 points.

N-level students can go to the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), either directly or through the Direct Entry Scheme to Polytechnic Programme. They also have the option to continue to Secondary 5 and take the O-level exams.

Ms Lim said her teachers advised her to take the ITE route – they said she seemed "more suited to Sec 5". But she chose to continue to Sec 5.

"I was stubborn. The more they said I couldn't take the O levels, the more I wanted to do it. I told myself that if I put my heart and soul into it, I could succeed."

Using the same strategy she did in the run-up to the N levels, she scored 12 points for the O levels. It surprised everyone. The experience made her realise she could do anything she put her mind to.

She carried this mindset all the way to Republic Polytechnic (RP), where she studied sports coaching. It was also where she discovered a talent – and passion – for wrestling.

Overcoming adversity to excel as an athlete



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DRIVEN AND INDEPENDENT

This girl is very independent. When she wants to do something, she doesn't stop until she gets it done. She always tells me, 'Mum, don't worry, I'll give you a good life some day.' And I tell her, 'Keep going, I'm always behind you, never give up.'



MS CLAIRE BERANI, on her daughter, national wrestler Danielle Lim.

GENERATION GRIT

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She also receives bursaries of over \$6,000 yearly from the Ministry of Education and North West Community Development Council.

On the wrestling front, she is training hard in the hope of representing Singapore at the SEA Games and the Asian Games, as well as, one day, the Olympic Games.

She credits her mother, Ms Claire Berani, 52, for sticking by them.

"Mum could have left home when she wasn't wanted, but she stayed. No matter how naughty we were, she kept on being strong."

That was among the reasons Ms Lim decided to pull up her socks in secondary school. "I didn't want to be another problem for her."

Ms Berani is the family's main breadwinner, and currently draws \$1,400 a month as a helper in a satay kitchen. The family has since moved from Chai Chee to a flat in Yishun, which is fully paid for.

Said Ms Berani: "This girl is very independent. When she wants to do something, she doesn't stop until

she gets it done. She always tells me, 'Mum, don't worry, I'll give you a good life some day.'

"And I tell her, 'Keep going, I'm always behind you, never give up.'"

But Ms Lim has not spoken to her brother since she turned him in to the police. They are "in different places and we see the world differently", she said.

She has, however, made up with her father, who mended his ways and returned home in 2016 after a colon cancer scare, and now works as a Grab driver.

Ms Lim said: "He thought he was going to die and he wanted to apologise to us before it happened. There's still a barrier between us, we don't talk much. But I've forgiven him. After all, he's the one who gave me this life."

Her life experiences have taught her to "focus on the things you can control" and that "as long as I don't stop trying, I can succeed".

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In 2017, during her first year in RP, she was assigned to observe a wrestling coach at a training session. Seeing Ms Lim's interest, he asked her to try her hand at lifting someone. He then invited her to join the next three sessions, and asked her to have a go at an upcoming local meet.

She agreed. With just 11 days of practice and one basic wrestling technique, she won her first medal. The coach said she had potential and suggested she continue training with him. She later joined the national development team and last year she made the national team.

She said of wrestling: "It makes me feel like I am empowering myself. When the whistle blows, it's just me and my opponent on the mat. No one controls the results but me. Everything is in the mind."

So far, Ms Lim has represented Singapore at nine competitions in countries including China and Thailand. She has won six medals.

Now a first-year physiotherapy student at the Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), she has received the Singapore Olympic Foundation-Peter Lim Scholarship, as well as an SIT scholarship to help defray costs. Last month, she was awarded a scholarship from Evolve Mixed Martial Arts, which includes \$10,000 in cash.