

Ex-commando's perseverance wins him SkillsFuture Fellowships

From crippling self-doubt to upskilling clout



Even if you don't get it, you will know why – and then you can improve yourself. It's a growth opportunity.

– Mr Bernard Mackenzie, 2022 SkillsFuture Fellowships recipient, on why he advises others to apply for the SkillsFuture Fellowships

By RACHEL CHIA

When Mr Bernard Mackenzie was growing up, he struggled with abject poverty and an absent dad. He was crushed by self-doubt.

"I would tell myself: 'I don't think I can achieve,'" says the 47-year-old Singaporean. "I was a mediocre student, not the sharpest tool in the toolbox."

Mr Mackenzie's parents divorced when he was five, and he lived with his brother and mother, a hospital cleaner, in a one-room rental flat in MacPherson.

The family of three struggled to make ends meet, and the teen would later drop out of his marine engineering course at the Singapore Maritime Academy because he couldn't afford the fees.

Fast forward to three decades later and he would receive the SkillsFuture Fellowships from President Halimah Yacob, and be held up as a shining example of success from lifelong learning.

The turnaround began when Mr Mackenzie signed on with the army as a commando for six years. The pay helped stabilise the family's finances.

Driven to improve himself, he became fascinated with psychology after attending a briefing at a private university.

"I wanted to know what was behind the thoughts I experienced as a child, and answer the questions that nobody had ever helped me answer," says Mr Mackenzie.

"I sidelined myself at school," he adds. "I hated teachers, because most teachers would give out an assignment to write about your family, and it was painful to write about my dad."

"Then I'd start asking myself: 'Why am I going through this?' I wanted to make sense about why things had gone wrong for me."

Mr Mackenzie used his savings and salary to enrol at the University of Western Sydney in 1998 for a bachelor's in applied psychology.

"After my very first lecture, I was afraid. And I told my wife that if I failed the next exam, I would give up on further education as I'm not good enough. But I passed, and I passed well!" he says. "That gave me motivation, and helped me realise what I can do."

Upon graduation, he landed a role as a counsellor with the Asian Women's Welfare Association, where he worked with children with disabilities. "A good number of these students also came from families of lower socio-economic status, just like me," he says.

Skills boost bears fruit

Today, Mr Mackenzie is a clinic manager at the National Institute of Education (NIE). He supervises a team of 18 to offer counselling at the NIE wellness centre at Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

One of his achievements has been to create a series of protocols enabling the team to offer counsel-



Counsellor Bernard Mackenzie is passionate about skills upgrading as he wants to equip himself with relevant knowledge to guide the next generation. PHOTO: THARM SOOK WAI

ling over Zoom to university students, staff and the public. This resulted in a 40 per cent uptick in clients amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

Convinced about the value of skills upgrading, Mr Mackenzie dug deeper into his pockets to pay for a series of further studies.

He now boasts three diplomas – including one on supervision of psychology practitioners – and a master's in counselling from Melbourne's Swinburne University of Technology. He is now pursuing a doctorate at NTU.

"At some point, I felt the skills (from my bachelor's degree) were not enough," he says. "I wanted to ground myself in application, and equip myself with the knowledge to guide the next generation of counsellors."

Special educational needs counsellor Amanda Tay, 29, is one of those who have gained from Mr Mackenzie's passion and experience.

Mr Mackenzie was Ms Tay's clinical supervisor for six months before she took on her current role at Nanyang Polytechnic in May 2022.

"Bernard provided a safe and reflective environment for experiential learning, essential to learning the craft of counselling," she says.

"Throughout our sessions, he provided constructive feedback on my counselling interventions and was supportive of the personal and professional development of fledgling counsellors."

Waking up at 4.30am to study

Mr Mackenzie, a father of two aged 12 and 20, attributes his achievements to his military discipline. On weekday nights, he does course readings at 10.30pm, and wakes up at 4.30am on weekends to do assignments.

"As commandos, we were always told that if you put your mind to it, your body will champion it."

Such efforts have also secured what he calls the highlight of his career: the SkillsFuture Fellowships, which he received in 2022.

It took Mr Mackenzie three attempts before he finally clinched the annual accolade. "Back then, I thought: 'should I apply?' There was a part of me that said 'forget it, because the recipients' profiles were spectacular compared to mine," he admits.

But he decided to give it a shot when he embarked on his doctoral studies in 2020. After each attempt, he would sharpen his approach.

"I worried that I was blowing my trumpet too much," he says. "Now that I reflect about it, I probably discounted myself quite a bit."

Though the two failed applications stung, Mr Mackenzie persevered with encouragement from his daughters; he wanted to show them that "no matter what the situation is, you can turn it around".

His advice for others: If you don't try, you won't know. "Even if you don't get it, you will know why – and then you can improve yourself," he says. "It's a growth opportunity."

Fellowships spur further pursuits

The SkillsFuture Fellowships honours individuals as masters of skills and mentors of future talent.

Presented by the President of Singapore, recipients also receive a monetary award of \$10,000 to continue their pursuit of skills

mastery

Applications are open to Singapore citizens with at least 10 years of work experience in the same (or related) industry or job function

SkillsFuture Fellowships recipients

possess deep skills in relevant areas of professional and technical expertise, demonstrate a strong personal commitment to lifelong learning and mastery of domain, and contribute significantly to the skills development of others.