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Scholar masters computer basics in 2 days

BY AMY CHEW

The odds were against him and yet he made it. It was for the much sought after scholarship from the Defence Science and Technology Agency (DSTA), which provides the best training in science and engineering.

The winner of that scholarship can study in universities overseas in the US and UK.

And this year, there was stiff competition for this prestigious two-year-old scholarship.

Out of the 5000 applicants, only 40 managed to make the cut.

And Lionel Heng, 18, (above right), is one of these 40.

EXCEPTIONAL

But emerging the winner isn't the only thing that makes him exceptional.

Lionel is the first hearing-impaired scholar accepted by the DSTA.

The 18-year-old won the \$500,000 scholarship to pursue a Computer Science degree at the Carnegie Mellon University in the US in 2003.

And being shortlisted for the interview was just the beginning.

He said "I was nervous because I didn't quite know what to expect."

Not wanting to assess him on interviews only, the DSTA, for the first time, put Lionel on a one-week hands-on-job assignment on what he was good at – computer science.

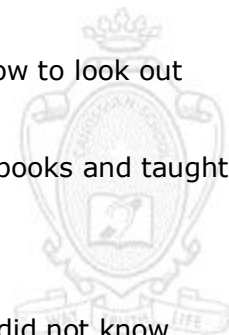
And boy, did he impress them. He earned good reviews for his performance in the written tests and in practical programming assignments.

"I did a few programming problems, set up a web server and even learnt how to look out for traces of hacking," said Lionel.

The hardworking teen, who calls it an "enlightening experience", borrowed books and taught himself the basics of programming languages in just two days.

But success did not come easily for this teenager.

As a child, he said he often felt isolated at school – St Anthony's Primary – did not know how to deal with his classmates.



He said , "I felt rather afraid and lost at first, as if I was all alone in a dark forest."

But he overcame his fears when he enrolled in St Joseph's Institution and National Junior College.

GAINING CONFIDENCE

In fact, Lionel became so confident that he applied for the scholarship.

He said, "I wanted to achieve my goals in life and knew that a prestigious scholarship would blaze the path for me to achieve them.

"Instead of sitting and doing nothing, I had to do something even though it seemed hopeless."

And this effort was not lost on the DSTA.

According to Mrs Lee Seow Choo, senior manager (recruitment and scholarship) at the DSTA, Lionel was first shortlisted on the basis of his academic results and co-curricular activities:

- Seven distinctions for O levels
- Four As and good results in two Special Papers at A levels
- He also represented his college at the National Schools' Bowling Championships.

Lionel's father, Mr. Patrick Heng, 44, is a businessman. His mother, Madam Emilyn Sim, 43, helps with the business.

He has a 14-year-old brother and an 11-year old sister.

Said Madam Sim: "I am very proud of him. We were prepared to send him overseas. But he didn't want to use our money."

Said Lionel: "I defied people's expectations by becoming a DSTA scholar.

"I proved that someone very focused on his goals could achieve them easily through hard work."

