

# TO SEE A WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND



CASTLES CAN FLY



## Industrial engineer digs deep and comes up with a winner in sandcastle building kits



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**A**lvin Lee has a piece of life advice. "Plant as many good seeds as you can. They will grow and come back to save you one day," he says sagely.

Cultivate good relationships. Have an open heart and mind, and do not give up on yourself or your dreams, he adds.

Platitudes, some will say. But these beliefs have helped him navigate the peaks and troughs of his life.

In his 30s, he gave up a cushy corporate job, ignored naysayers and headed to the United States to market a sandcastle building kit he had designed with his son, nephews and nieces.

In his 40s, he got involved in a start-up and lost his life savings when the dotcom bubble burst. But he bounced back.

More than 20 years ago, I planted a seed when I came up with the sandcastle building kit. Today it has come back to save me," he says.

Now 57, Mr Lee is the founder of Castles Can Fly, an outfit which earns a handsome profit from sandcastle building activities.

Besides using sandcastles to conduct training and team-building sessions, it also organises events and parties for corporations, organisations and others. Its social enterprise arm encourages creativity and helps families and the underprivileged interact and bond.

With skin tanned honey brown from hours under the sun, the industrial engineering graduate has an easy manner and a gravelly voice.

His father sold ang ku kueh - steamed glutinous rice flour cakes with a mung bean filling - and had two wives who were sisters. "The first wife bore him four sons, and the second wife three. My mother was the second wife, and I'm her eldest son," says Mr Lee.

The whole brood lived under

village in Somapah, where the Singapore Expo now stands in Upper Changi.

Making ang ku kueh was a cottage industry for the family. The village and the market had their share of unsavoury characters, from gamblers to drug addicts, but he and his brothers dug around from a young age not to keep their company.

He attended Changkat Primary, St Patrick's and Tanjong Katong Technical and became the only one in the family to enter a polytechnic. In his final year, he aced all his subjects.

"That was when I realised that I had a shot at university and could actually go somewhere in life. But we were too poor."

National service came next, and he was selected for officer training. He decided to sign on with the army after completing the course.

"I was 18 years old and I remember drawing a line down the middle of a piece of paper and listing the pros and cons. The salary was not bad, I would have a rank, I could eat in the officers' mess, and I could be a yaya papaya and walk around and people would go 'Yes, Sir', 'No, Sir'," he says with a laugh, lapsing into English.

Almost immediately, he was sent to Sweden for training so that he could help set up the Singapore Air Defence Artillery.

"I remember the whole village came out to send me off at Paya Lebar Airport in 1978. My father told everyone 'I cho giat,'" he says, using the Teochew expression for government official.

The trip stretched his mind. Mr Lee spent five years in the army. Each year, he would apply to a different university abroad, including the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland.

"And every year I would get a place. My dad would hand me the envelope and ask, 'Why are you applying? You know we have no money right?'" recalls Mr Lee, adding that government scholarships in those days mostly went to A-level holders, not polytechnic graduates. "I guess I did it just to prove that I could."

He had no firm career plan when he decided to leave the army. "I just knew I didn't want to be a career officer," he says.

Two brief sales stints followed, one for a Swedish maritime company and another for a company selling water scooters.

It was not until he was working at C Melchers - a global conglomerate offering a whole range of services - that he did well enough to save some money for his longed-for university degree.

Although he was supposed to sell meters, he ended up selling a \$400,000 system to test bullets to Chartered Industries.

By then married to a secretary, he quit after two years and headed off for the University of Newcastle in New South Wales, Australia, with \$15,000 in his pocket.



The National Parks Board thought Mr Alvin Lee's idea of setting up a centre devoted to building sandcastles was worth supporting and, under the Government's little-known First Mover programme, he was allocated a piece of land at East Coast Park where his Castle Beach now proudly sits.



Mr Lee with one of his sand sculptures. PHOTO: ALVIN LEE

### Honesty pays

"One year, after everything was done, I asked Howard why he chose me. He said: 'I saw a hungry person. You basically put the whole file into my hands; I didn't have to do a single thing. You told me a lot about what you didn't know. You were also an honest man.'"

MR ALVIN LEE on Mr Howard Bobroff, CEO of Eagles Affiliates, which manufactured his sandcastle building kit Beachworks in the 1990s

### Degrees of faith

"A lot of my engineer friends said I was mad to leave my general manager job. They said: 'You have an MBA and an engineering degree. Why are you wasting your time making a toy?' I said: 'Do you know how much of my engineering degree and my MBA went into this? Everything is a waste of time if you think negatively. It's not what you have; it's what you do with what you have that's important.'"

MR LEE, on naysayers who told him not to pursue his dream

To make ends meet while he studied industrial engineering full-time, he waited tables, drove taxis and did other odd jobs. He was the president of the Singapore Students' Association too.

"My son was born in my second year. That year I failed three subjects," he says with a laugh.

But he graduated. He became a production engineer at Seagate,

earning just \$1,800 - almost half what he made at C Melchers.

Two years later, he and his wife parted ways amicably.

His next stop was Thomson Electronics where he applied for a company scholarship to study part-time for his MBA from the University of Brunel Henley at the Singapore Institute of Management.

His energy and resourcefulness inspired one of his Indonesian cli-

## IT CHANGED MY LIFE

ents to hire him to run his electronics factory in Jakarta.

The job paid handsomely, and Mr Lee flew back every weekend to be with his son.

"One of my brothers lived in the flat above mine, and every weekend, I would do things with my son and my nephews and niece, like painting murals and making kites."

They also spent a lot of time at the East Coast Park beach and that was when the idea of a sandcastle building kit took root.

With input from the children, he would fashion the tools for the kit in the kitchen of his four-room Tampines flat.

Putting his MBA training to good use, he came up with a business plan, again with input from the children. He sent it to at least 25 toymakers but came up against a wall. "Nobody believed in me except the children. I could not give up because if I did, the children would also give up when they grew up," says Mr Lee, who forked out a few thousand dollars to have his sandcastle kit patented.

He decided to train his sights on the US which had a developed toy market. So he quit his job to pursue his dream.

"I went to my boss and told him. He didn't tell me whether I should stay or leave but he gave me the best piece of advice ever. He told me to think about what I saw myself doing and what would make me excited every morning five years down the road," he says.

After receiving a positive response from a plastic manufacturer, he flew to a toy and craft fair in Chicago to meet the management.

Alas, the company had pulled out of the fair at the last minute without informing him. But armed with his business proposal and business card, he approached several of the exhibitors.

One of them, plastic products firm Eagles Affiliates, came on board and signed a contract to manufacture the kit named Beachworks six weeks later. Besides what he asked for, the company allocated US\$1.5 million to help develop the toy and even engaged him to oversee its production.

Released a year later in 1997, Beachworks proved a hit and was featured on several programmes on different news networks.

Mr Lee went back to a full-time job after the kit's successful launch, working in Colorado for a high-tech electronics firm and, later, in Beijing as a production director for branding and event organiser Pico Art.

A start-up, 3Fusion, which had more than \$14 million in funding, then headhunted him to become the CEO of its online shopping subsidiary in 2000.

Within 18 months, it crashed. "I was 45 years old, and all the money I had made had gone into it. I stood as guarantor for many things and was sued almost bankrupt," says Mr Lee, who lost his life savings of nearly half a million dollars.

A year of darkness followed. "No one would employ me," he recalls. "I finally found work managing a food delivery company but was told to leave after a few months, not because I did not work hard but because I was deemed too qualified for the job."

Life, however, was not entirely bleak. He married Ms Joy Leong, his office manager at the start-up.

"I asked her why she agreed to marry me. She said, 'In Shenton Way, there is a saying: Buy low, sell high. I've seen when you were high so I will buy you now since you're low. One day I will sell you'," he says of his second wife, with whom he has two daughters, aged eight and 11. His son is now 29 and works as a lab technician.

A friend then suggested he become a corporate trainer. Although he balked initially, he soon warmed to the idea and went about assiduously developing content for a talk on innovation based on his experiences.

Around the same time, a friend of a friend who had heard of his plight lent him \$10,000 with no questions asked.

Mr Lee wrote his book, Castles Can Fly, now in its third reprint. He got his first break when he was engaged to speak at a school principals' conference. Word spread, and soon he was giving talks at schools and organisations.

In 2004, he decided to take his business outdoors; sandcastle building became an important training and motivational tool. The following year, he started a social enterprise arm, Castle Beach.

Every weekend, with a band of volunteers, he promotes building sandcastles as a healthy bonding exercise free of charge at East Coast Park.

"My corporate and social enterprise arms feed each other. The more activities I do for Castle Beach, the more corporate business I get. And the more corporate business I have, the more I can continue my social enterprise," says the entrepreneur whose clients include banks, insurance companies and government corporations. He has also licensed his training methods to companies in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Brunei and Mauritius.

Life, he says, has come full circle for him.

"First, you build castles in the air. Then you build castles everywhere."

语录 读书改变命运,刻苦成就事业,态度决定一切。

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在沙滩堆砌沙堡是不少人心中美好的童年回忆。不过已56岁的李伟隆没让这一切停留在回忆里,一年至少花104天,在沙滩上建沙堡。

他是堆砌沙堡工具的发明家,也是社会企业“Castle Beach”和企业培训公司“Beautiful Minds”的创办人。这三个身份,都和砌沙堡有关。

对李伟隆而言,堆砌沙堡不仅是儿童玩意儿,也是一门学问,甚至可延伸至人生哲学,让人获益不浅。

建立关系 建立信任...

# 堆砌沙堡悟人生

▲李伟隆于炎热的周日下午,在沙滩上举行企业培训营。

文/王颖欣  
图/赫成源



一门学问  
李伟隆认为,堆砌沙堡是

在一个炎热的周日下午,东海岸熟食中心附近的一段沙滩,出现200名成人在沙堆中努力堆砌沙堡的奇妙画面。

这些人当中,有个身穿黄衣的男人身影,堆砌得特别用心。

他全身沾着沙粒,黝黑的脸颊晒得通红,戴的红色眼镜随着汗水微微滑下鼻梁,但仍起劲的拿着工具将城堡的楼梯刻画出来,认真之余又看似不费吹灰之力。

他,就是李伟隆。1993年,他与孩子、侄儿与侄女到沙滩堆砌沙堡时,猛然发现市面上无打造沙堡的工具,花费两年时间在工作之余研发了一套沙堡玩具。

1995年,他毅然辞去电子工厂总经理的稳定工作,远赴美国寻找投资伙伴,将玩具商品化。2003年,他创办公司,通过堆砌沙堡活动,让学生和上班族尝试体验学习。

访问当天下午,李伟隆正好为一家公司的约200名职员在沙滩上举行企业培训营。完毕后,记者询问汗流浹背的他,想在那接受访问。没料到,他选择坐在沙上,原因是一年至少52个周末都在沙滩工作的他,“坐在沙滩最舒服”。

## 帮助企业培训

企业培训计划跟堆砌沙堡看似风马牛不相及,到底可以学到什么应用在公司的营运上?

李伟隆透露,当天举办的企业培训营中将参与者分成9个小组,各别堆砌沙堡,过后半途要求他们接手别人已做到一半的沙堡。这样的安排别有用心,是为了模拟真实生活中,公司出现始料不及的变化时,职员如何应对。

他说,在公司上班,往往会出要接手同事烂摊子的情况,也有可能把工作做得好好时,却忽然被调派去另一组去,职员满心的不愿,不过必须学会接受。

“我的目的是,整个世界在变,每个人都要跟着变,一般上没有人要变,现在是200多个人要怎么一起变。”

在当天的企业培训活动中,有职员临时没出席,导致有团队的人数不足,组长向他埋怨为何别组有12人,自己却只有8人。

人手不足,对李伟隆而言,也正是现实生活不少企业主管常常面对的困境。

“现实生活中每次都会发生这样的事!我要他们有概念,生活就是不公平的。不要跟老板讲说,

你的人不够。(现实生活中)往往不够钱,往往一个顾客无理取闹,往往同事放你飞机...就是不要去计较它。”

后来,李伟隆又将三个小组整合在一起,从原本的每组12人增加至36人,让团员继续堆砌沙堡,模拟该企业日后要迈向的扩充道路,结果又有人抱怨“我12个人已经头痛了,36个人要怎么做?”

“我要他们感受到扩充时,那个动态,心情是怎样的?我们都属于整个动态的一部分,你不可能继续安于现状,处在你的小地方,全体人员都得动起来,每人都得一起意识到这点。”

## 可应用在生活中

堆砌沙堡,必经四个步骤。

这四个步骤分别是与组员先勾勒出最终沙堡成品的愿景,再来打砌沙堡的基础,建造出结构,最后专研其中的细节。

李伟隆认为,这四个步骤可应用在生活中任何事物。“我们一生中都在建东西,建公司,建立关系,建立家庭,建社会,无论建设什么都需要经过这四个步骤。建立关系的基础是信任,如何有信任就是我对您诚实...经过这个建沙堡经验,现在建公司,建立与顾客的关系等。”

他所提倡的是体验教学,提供环境让参与者自己去领悟道理。

一个沙堡即使击毁了,仍找不到连接沙粒在一起的材料,因为那是眼睛所看不到的——按压沙堡过程中的沙加水加“压力”把沙粒黏在一起。

他指着周围形形色色的沙堡说:“一切事物的关键,在于是‘什么’将一切堆系在一起。维系着沙堡的是压力,一个家庭里也许是老祖母维系着这家庭,老祖母去世,家庭就散了。是什么维系着家庭?可能是母亲,可能是宗教。如果阿里巴巴没有马云,还会在吗?是什么东西让公司联系在一起?需要自己去找出这个秘密。”

他认为,每个团队,每个公司,让职员齐心协力的元素都不同,一个领袖就是要找出这个处在夹缝间,眼睛看不见的微妙元素。

## 回馈社会帮助弱势群体

除了让企业学习,堆砌沙堡也可回馈社会,李伟隆2005年成立社会企业,在周末教公众和弱势群体如何堆砌沙堡,自得其乐。

“如单亲家庭的孩子,内心有股悲伤,我的用意就是让他们通过建沙堡找寻快乐。不管你是否自闭、有阅读障碍、失聪...你一样可以体验到和普通人一样建造沙堡的快乐。”

李伟隆转头望着身后的沙滩和大海,语带惋惜说:“现在的小孩子生长在电脑社会,是个很假的社会,小孩子只关注电子器材,不像在这里一切都是真实的,水、风、沙堡倒塌这些全都是真的...”

自认热爱生命,充满好奇心的他说话中气十足,带股洒脱与热血,但爱把看似再平凡不过的一切,衍生到生命哲学,颇有禅意。

“我也在学人生道理;沙、水加压力、愿景、基础、结构和细节。我把全部加起来当成一门学问。”

▼参加者花了几个小时,制成沙堡。



社会企业“Castle Beach”正在找寻义工,有兴趣者可电邮至enquiry@castlescanfly.com查询。