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Gems waiting to shine

Be thankful for those who still believe in us, even when we lose faith in ourselves.

AS someone who has never been to university, I have not experienced what it must be like to walk up to the stage to receive a scroll on convocation day.

It is a special day no doubt, not just for the graduates but also their parents.

With the proliferation of so many universities and colleges, both public and private, convocation days no longer command the kind of media attention that they used to.

Today, the news will usually be about some VIP receiving an honorary doctorate rather than stories about the graduates themselves.

Yet, there is much we can learn from some of the success stories. I was immensely touched recently by the story of a fine young man known to me.

When Nigel Evan Rode went up to receive his masters degree in education at Universiti Putra Malaysia recently, he captioned the picture on

his Facebook page with these words: "A moment on stage, a memory for a lifetime".

It must have been a challenging journey. As a part-time student, it was not easy balancing a full-time teaching job with the evening and night classes he had to attend.

"Assignments, exams, presentations, classes, research ... the journey was long and tiring," he said.

I can imagine what an emotional day it must have been for him, more so when his father, for health reasons, couldn't be at the convocation. He shared: "I had to try very hard to hold back my tears as I walked up on stage to receive my scroll that afternoon.

"Never in a million years did I ever imagine graduating with a Masters. In secondary school, I was very weak in my studies and was placed in one of the weakest classes.

"Some people even gave up on me. But I managed to graduate with

a degree (in accounting) nine years ago. I thought that was as far as I could go. I was wrong ... God had another surprise in store for me.

"Today, I have officially graduated with a 3.91 Masters In Education ... words cannot describe how awed I am at the way God has led me ever since my SPM."

I know Nigel's family well enough to understand the thoughts that went through his mind. His family has always been very supportive, but I reckon it was his own passion that made this special day possible.

Despite his accountancy degree, he went into the teaching profession. And I saw how he brought his passion to the classroom.

He did not see it as a job but as a calling, and he knew he could make a difference in the lives of those he taught.

After what he went through himself in school, he knew that success or failure is very much dependent

not only on belief in oneself, but also on how others encourage you along the way. His mission was to be an encourager.

I know teachers like him. I did very well in primary school and was selected to enter a premier school at secondary level. But there, I found that I was not only competing with the best and the brightest from various schools, but also had to deal with some teachers who seemed to equate success only with the marks you scored in examinations.

Some of us are late bloomers, while others show strengths beyond the academic fields. It took special teachers to recognise and encourage us in an environment when attention was focused mostly on results.

I am glad that Nigel is making a difference in the lives of the students under his charge.

The reason for doing his Masters, he tells me, is not to seek greener pastures in other fields, but to equip

himself to become a better teacher.

"Since I see myself in the line of education for the rest of my life, I see this as a sort of investment," he says.

Apart from his faith in God and his loving and supportive parents, Nigel credits his students for driving him to succeed.

"Whenever I was tired or down, I looked forward to going to school to be among my students. They somehow gave me the energy to go on."

Nigel also remembers the teachers who gave him hope during his schooling days.

"They never gave up on me, even when I gave up on myself. They are the ones who saw something in me, even when many others looked down on me."

Executive editor Soo Ewe Jin salutes the teachers who never label students useless or 'bodoh', but see them as unpolished gems that could shine one day.