

## Business

my paper TUESDAY JANUARY 11, 2011 A18

### THE VISIONARIES

# It's cool to take pride in good work

In this fortnightly series, our writers talk to people who stand out in their areas of interest, especially those from the corporate world



By VICTORIA BARKER

ONE could say that the creation of Stolz Engineering – a cooling-tower company whose name means “pride” in German – was a long time in the making.

That is because its founder and managing director, Mr Mark Tan, had an abiding interest in “cooling” since he was a child.

Back then, his father would take the family on vacations to Malaysia’s Cameron Highlands, where temperatures can get as low as 12 deg C.

“I loved the cold, and had this dream about changing the climate in Singapore so we wouldn’t have to travel so far to enjoy temperate weather,” a jovial Mr Tan, who is now 35, told *my paper* at a recent interview in his Genting Lane office.

His fascination continued through the years, spurred on perhaps by his father’s company, Aircontrols Engineering, which deals with commercial cooling towers.

When Mr Tan was a student at Nanyang Junior College, he would help out in his father’s business during school holidays, earning around \$50 for three or four hours of work “unstuffing”

### MARK TAN’S BIODATA

**Who:** Mr Mark Tan, 35, founder and managing director of Stolz Engineering, a cooling-tower company that supplies, installs and maintains specialised equipment used in cooling processes.

**Education:** Mr Tan attended St Gabriel’s primary and secondary schools before going to Nanyang Junior College, where he was in the Science stream. He served in the army as an infantry officer.

He went on to study at Nanyang Technological University, where he majored in thermodynamics and graduated with a bachelor’s in engineering (mechanical).

**Career:** Having earlier helped out at his father’s commercial cooling-tower firm, Mr Tan started his career in the Heat, Ventilation and Air-conditioning industry with American consulting firm Parsons Brinckerhoff in 2001.

The following year, he joined Japanese multinational contracting firm Taikisha Singapore as a



**COOL DUDE:** Stolz Engineering’s founder and managing director, Mr Mark Tan (left), has his father to thank for teaching him the value of money. (PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN)

project engineer.

He has also worked with American chiller company York International.

After returning to manage his father’s business for two years,

he started Stolz Engineering with his wealth of knowledge.

Stolz has since supplied many prestigious projects in Singapore, including Suntec City and One Raffles Quay.

cooling towers that had arrived in 40-foot containers.

“It was a labour-intensive job, so I roped in some of my friends who were dragon boaters... My dad saved money (by hiring us),” he said with a laugh.

Mr Tan could have carried on working in his father’s company, but he chose instead to venture into the industry on his own.

After graduating from Nanyang Technological University with a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering, the father of two – son, Xavier, is nearing five; and daughter, Andrea, is six months old – spent seven

years learning the ins and outs of the industry.

He also served a two-year stint as a sales and general manager at Aircontrols during this time.

Mr Tan started Stolz Engineering – which supplies, installs and maintains specialised equipment used by cooling processes in the industrial sector – in 2007 with just \$50,000 and a seven-member team.

Today, the 40-strong company has a turnover of between \$12 million and \$15 million annually.

Elaborating on his decision to branch out, Mr Tan – who is

married to Ms Stella Gwee, a director at Stolz – said thoughtfully: “When father and son work together, they can have a lot of issues and politics.”

For example, while Mr Tan was keen to invest in new operations in the industrial sector, his more “traditional” father, now 60, was wary of forking out cash for such a venture.

Still, the elder Tan gave his “blessings” to his son’s venture – and the younger Tan has since proved himself.

Within a short span of three years, Stolz secured a 35 per cent market share in the industrial sector, along with a 20 per

cent share in the commercial sector.

According to reports, the global market for cooling towers is set to hit US\$1.8 billion (S\$2.3 billion) by 2015.

The company – which also has offices in Klang, Malaysia – has supplied cooling towers to commercial projects such as Raffles City, One Raffles Quay and Gardens By The Bay.

For his outstanding achievement in his field, Mr Tan has been recognised by the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises, which named him as one of the winners of its Entrepreneur of the Year Awards last year.

But Mr Tan is not content to rest on his laurels.

He has big plans to venture farther into the region, starting with Vietnam in the second or third quarter of this year. After that, he aims to penetrate China.

“We’ll take things one step at a time,” he said modestly.

For now, though, he will focus on maintaining the secret to his success: Customer satisfaction.

“Ninety-five per cent of my customers are repeat customers,” he said. “Ultimately, it’s about building a relationship with them, giving them what they want, and constantly trying to improve.”

“That’s the philosophy behind my company.”

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### HELPSDESK 我的字典

**Abiding:** 持久的 chí jiǔ de

**Stint:** 一段时间 yī duàn shí jiān

**Branch out:** 向新的方向发展 xiàng xīn de fāng xiàng fā zhǎn

**Laurels:** 指荣誉 zhǐ róng yù