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Up close&personal

Bugs Tan

Malaysian inventor gets ...

YVONNE TAN

Meet Bugs Tan, the inventor. While many among us may not have heard about this soft-spoken local boy made good, Tan has been steadily chalking up some impressive accolades in the world of innovation.

He won the National Innovation Award 2007 for his invention of his Light Weight Grating System, a flooring system used for the oil and gas industry, and more recently received India's Excellent Innovation Award 2009 in recognition of his contributions to the global field of innovation.

Tan is also the co-founder of the Malaysia Association of Creativity and Innovations and a lecturer and facilitator at various educational institutions.

But it wasn't always blue skies for him.

Tan was born and bred in Klang in the 1960s. Like many young men then void of varied options, he helped his father in the latter's business which dealt mainly with the trading of engines for the agriculture and construction industries upon completing his secondary education.

"Actually, I don't have tertiary education. All my knowledge has been acquired through reading and doing it the hard way," he says in an interview with *StarBizWeek*.

It was also at his father's company that the young Tan learned most of the "technical stuff" about engines and machinery and his interest in these areas grew, he says.

"Being a trader is never easy. Competition is intense and at that time I found the prices we offered for our products were getting more and more competitive. So I thought, why not come up with my own product and sell it direct in the market?"

"You can say I was pushed into setting up my own business and in the beginning, it was challenging indeed," he recalls.

Tan's first attempt at invention involved trying to build a small multipurpose engine – used for the agricultural industry. The invention was never completed as funding was a problem.

After getting that sorted out and gaining more contacts as well as confidence in the process, he and his team of engineers came up with another idea they called the multi-locking pulley.

This was successfully launched into the commercial market after much effort.

"I invent products based on market demand and "market problems". "People get frustrated sometimes when they face problems but they forget that these problems are opportunities in themselves," he says.

Today, Tan says he has more than 10 intellectual properties (IPs) under his name. Some of the patents, he says, are filed here, while the others are filed overseas.

"My inventions are based on existing products. I improve on them. To just come up with a new product is difficult. We still have to base our inventions on something," he says.

He collaborates with Universiti Malaya on his inventions. "The concept comes from me. Their engineers work on it. We work together to develop new products," he says.

Tan is grateful that he is now able to obtain grants from the Government rather easily. Every proposed invention, he says, gets him a grant of about RM150,000, while it takes about a year before the invention is ready for commercial use.

"Whenever I invent something, I will either sell the IP, or license it out.

Alternatively, I will manufacture the product myself if it's not too complicated. Otherwise, I will look

for joint-venture partners to manufacture and market it," Tan says.

"Basically, I'm not very commercially driven. I don't invent products to make a lot of money. Neither do I invent things to 'shioik sendiri'.

"I am a very observant person. Like I said, I observe what the market wants and needs, and I invent based on that."

This year, he says he will be busy with three main projects. The first one is an invention called Pokok Hidro, a hydrogen generator that can help cars save fuel by up to 20%.

It is different from other similar products in the market in that it "will consistently help your car save the same amount of fuel and it's very safe", he says.

With this latest invention, Tan will also do his part for Mother Nature. Every product sold will result in a tree planted in the buyer's name at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) in Kepong.

"I'm already in talks with FRIM on this. They like the idea very much," he says.

The generator will be priced at about RM1,000, which he says is cheap compared with similar products that sell at RM1,800 each.

Tan's creativity extends to animation. He is now working on an animated series called *Robot Boleh*.

The show focuses on encouraging kids to be creative and innovative, and will have 26 episodes. The plan is to sell the series to local television stations at about RM45,000 per episode.

The third project he will be busy with this year is his Lite-walk

Grating System, which is about ready for commercialisation. "I am now looking for industry players to manufacture and put it on the market," he says.

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Ten minutes into a conversation with Tan, one will notice that he is constantly beaming! Are all inventors this happy all the time?

"It's not so much as being an inventor, but I am a firm believer in the motto that life should be simple and one should always be contented. I am a peaceful guy, I start my day by meditating. I send my two girls to school, and then I go to my workshop and work," he says.

In life, we must always "avoid evil, do good and keep our minds purified", he says.

"I did invent a rat catcher once that used glue. With that, I was able to catch a rat as big as a cat. I even got a grant for it. But after a while, I gave up on the idea entirely because I believe we do not have the right to take another life, even that of a rat," he explains.

"I don't invent things that will damage people's lives," he adds.

The doting father of two girls, Amelia, 14 and Amanda, 16 – both are inventors themselves – also places top priority on family life.

"I am extremely close to my kids. I am their best friend. Their mum is the disciplinarian in the family," he says.

Obviously proud of his children, Tan says Amanda was a gold medalist at the International Student Invention Exhibition in South Korea in 2003 for her invention of the Vibrating Ear Ring for deaf children.

Amelia, meanwhile, is listed in the Malaysia Book of Records as the youngest inventor in the country – at the age of 7.

"I instill the art of creativity in them, I tell them to observe problems around them and submit their solutions to me. On average, they have one idea for me per month.

"Amelia is more serious about this right now, Amanda is a typical teenage girl. She's more into sports now. I don't force them but I encourage them to constantly think out the box," he says.

His advice to young people who aspire to become inventors? "Get a real job first!" The income from inventions takes time to come in.

"Don't become an inventor for the money. Always look at the demand, what the market wants, and work from there," he says.

"All my life, I have never dreamt of becoming a chief executive officer at a big company. To me, being contented is important. Being able to create products which can help my customers give me utmost satisfaction.

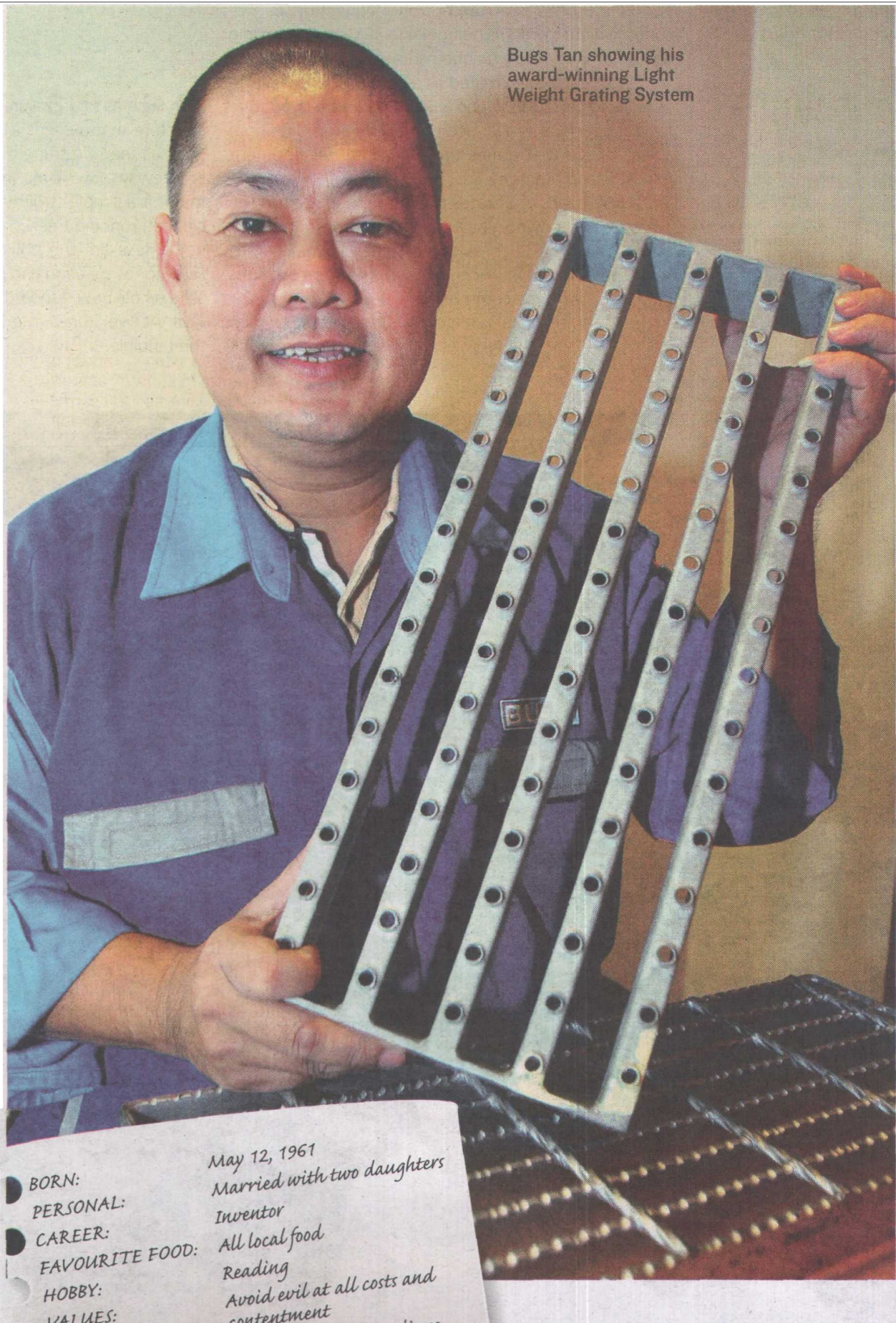
"I love what I do. It takes determination and hard work. In the end, I want the whole world to know that Malaysia can also produce world-class inventors."

Tan's positive attitude was apparent even in his younger days, according to him, which in turn earned him the name Bugs.

"When I was in school, I was the happy-go-lucky-kid. I used to make people laugh all the time and my friends referred to me as Bugs after Bugs Bunny. The name has stuck since, and it looks like a good thing it did, for even in his name, Tan stands out among the crowd.

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Bugs Tan showing his
award-winning Light
Weight Grating System

BORN: May 12, 1961
PERSONAL: Married with two daughters
CAREER: Inventor
FAVOURITE FOOD: All local food
HOBBY: Reading
VALUES: Avoid evil at all costs and contentment
INSPIRATION: Family and surroundings
Tan Yeow-Kiang, Bugs