

# From a wild child to a golden heart

## Former rebel Chew now helps others reform

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**JOHOR BARU:** Chew Kuan Yuan started getting involved in gangsterism and drugs at the age of 14 because he wanted fame and popularity in his school. He participated in numerous gang fights, some of which could have been fatal, as he was peddling drugs in another gang's territory in the city.

However, this all came to an end when he was caught at the age of 16 and sent for rehabilitation for two years. Now, at 37 years old and a father of four, he has turned over a new leaf and is currently leading Pusat Kebajikan Kalvari (PKK). PKK provides shelter for over 450 destitute individuals, including drug addicts, homeless people, abandoned children, the elderly, the mentally challenged, and abuse victims statewide.

"I never expected that one day I would be serving and leading the very same place that gave me a new beginning when I was a young boy," he said during an interview.

Recalling his troubled past, Chew, affectionately known as Athens among his peers, said it all began when he joined a gang in Form 2 with hopes of becoming popular, especially among girls. "I became really popular, and that's when I was introduced to drugs, including substances like ecstasy, ice, ketamine, and cannabis," he said, adding that he would party almost every night and doze off during school.

He managed to continue his studies until Form 3, but his parents' concerns and advice couldn't reach him as he had distanced himself from his family and siblings.

"My boss also started asking me to sell drugs to fund my addiction. I was involved in numerous gang fights, which resulted in injuries," he added. "This went on for about two years until one day, while I was high on drugs at my grandma's house, people from a care center came and took me for rehabilitation," he said, noting that he was a troublemaker there and attempted to escape twice.

The rehabilitation center, a PKK home in Labis, was not easy for him as he was among the youngest residents. "I found rehabilitation very difficult. I wanted to escape because my girlfriend was waiting for me with my money. Somehow, I always got caught. Due to my mischief, I was put in solitary confinement and caned," he recalled.

"After my second escape, I had an encounter with God during my solitary confinement, which forever changed my life," he said. He realized he no longer had the urge to escape and started adapting to life in rehab. During this time, he acquired new skills like playing the guitar and doing artwork.

Chew put a lot of effort into changing, and over time, the supervisors at PKK began to trust him with bigger responsibilities. When he turned 18, he graduated from rehabilitation and became a free person. However, he always felt a calling to serve the church or an NGO like PKK.

Although his family urged him to continue his studies with private tutors, that path was not successful. Instead, he found work with an IT company, earning about RM1,700 per month. During this time, he continued to serve at Calvary Community Church, primarily playing the guitar during worship.

In 2009, an opening for a clerk's job in the church arose, and Chew immediately took it, despite the more than 50% pay cut. "I have never regretted that decision. I consider it my calling to serve God and the community," he said, adding that he continued to excel and eventually started handling the media unit.

In 2018, Pastor Benedict Rajan, his senior overseer, wanted him to play an active role in PKK, and he was appointed as vice president. In April of the previous year, he became the chief operating officer (COO), overseeing 19 homes with a workforce of about 52 employees. Like him, 99% of their workers were individuals who had been rehabilitated and were using their skills to help others.

PKK has grown over the past 34 years and requires approximately RM300,000 per month to sustain its operations, serve



**Faith in turning things around:** Chew engaging with some of the boys in one of their shelter homes in Johor Baru.

- THOMAS YONG/The Star

the community and its residents, and pay its staff. "We are blessed to receive assistance from the church and private donors," he said, adding that even during the recent flood crisis, their home residents and volunteers reached out to help the communities in Chaah.

One of their biggest challenges arose after the Covid-19 pandemic, with more elderly people being abandoned and an increase in young people getting involved in drug addiction. "We have encountered cases of elderly people being left by the roadside or young people facing depression and attempting suicide. We try our best to help as many as we can," he said, emphasizing that a significant portion of their residents were drug addicts.

Their rehabilitation program typically lasts two years and includes helping addicts overcome their addiction, including

periods of solitary confinement during withdrawal symptoms, which can last up to two weeks for heroin addicts and one week for other substance users like cannabis or pills.

Despite the demanding nature of his job, which requires constant attention, Chew and his team find satisfaction in the impact they are making in the community. He shared success stories of abandoned children who have become successful, including one studying to be a doctor, one working as an airline pilot, and many who have reconciled with their families and returned home.

As for Chew, he has reconciled with his parents and siblings and married his sweetheart, whom he met while playing the guitar at church events. They are blessed with four children aged between one and seven years old.