

LIVING EVERY MOMENT

Talent, skills, speed and a live-in-the-moment attitude have informed the life and times of Dr. Leslie Kuek, plastic surgeon.

By Audrey Perera

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Knit pullover: Marks & Spencer

COVER STORY **Living every moment**

Childhood experiences live in us more than we realise, helping us to understand patterns and join the dots between events and attitudes.

For instance, what does a boy growing up in a very humble home have to do with a driven professional with no time to waste?

Plenty, as it turns out.

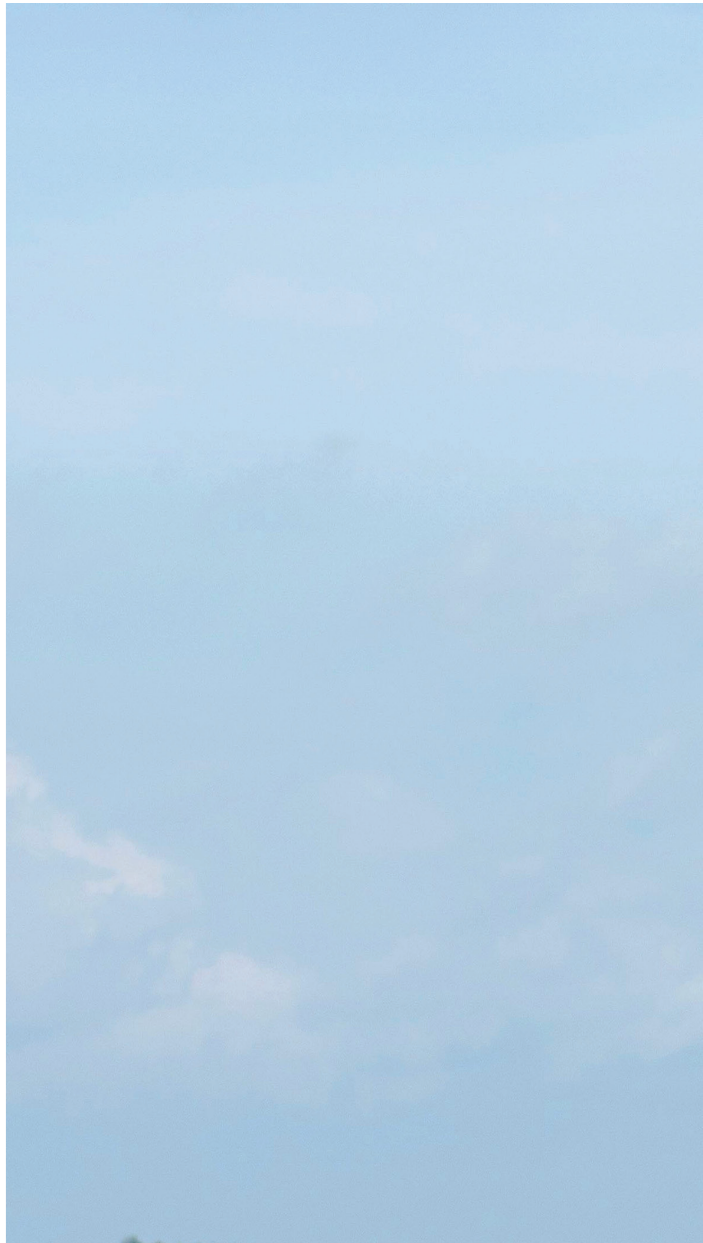
As a child, Dr Leslie Kuek lived in a room in his grandfather's house; that one room was shared with his parents and two younger siblings. The kids slept on the floor and their parents had the bed; it was crammed and not easy, but it was also fun because cousins were there all the time in this multi-family home arrangement.


"In that room was the sum total of our worldly possessions," he says. He grew up knowing that he could take nothing for granted. "My mother was always telling me that I was the eldest and that I had to do well. Since there was no money for university fees, it was my problem to solve."

This spurred him on. Added to which there were two other undeniable realities.

"I attended a school where the boys were very bright. And if you couldn't keep up, you were going to be left behind very badly. There was that incentive to spur you on, knowing that you had to pitch yourself against your peers, and not just match up, but do better. The school was also full of quite wealthy people. With my background, there was added pressure to prove that I could match up in spite of my disadvantages."

Physically too, he was, as he describes himself, a "skinny little runt" who could not excel in sports. "There wasn't the money for coaching or soccer boots or anything like that. You had to make do with whatever you had. Since I couldn't excel physically, I felt that I had to make good academically."





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And Leslie did indeed succeed in this adult-size quest to prove himself. In his late teens, he was offered scholarships to study medicine and chemical engineering, and he opted for medicine. “I wanted to be in a position to help, and to me that meant being a doctor with direct impact on people’s lives.”

As life became more financially stable, he pursued the sports he had always dreamed of. “I was a late starter; began windsurfing in my 20s, and also learnt how to golf, ski, drive later. I was trying to make up for lost time!”

Memories inform

Beneath the surface, though, is a perspective-shifting back story, which is related to the recent loss of his father. Describing his two younger siblings, he points out: “We have all done alright professionally and personally. We all got scholarships and scraped our way through those years. At family events, our relatives would come and tell us that our father was very proud of us. To me, it should not have been this way at all. It’s not that my father was proud of us – and he was – but that we were proud of him. He sacrificed everything to look after us, give us a good education and put us in the right places to make the best of our opportunities and get the best breaks in life. To me, it is more important that we are proud of him.

“I wish that I had told my dad this.”

Too often, he notes, we fail to tell people that we are proud of them. But it was an old-fashioned relationship. “He was busy making a living, mum was looking after the children. You listened to what your father said. He was not a friend, but a silent figure who worked hard and brought home the bacon. Once in a while he’d take us to Pulau Bukom where he worked; and it was a great treat to ride in a ferry over the water.”

These memories – bouncing over the waves, the smell of the sea, sunlight on the water, the voices of family members happy to be out together, and a glimpse into his father’s work world – remain precious.

Adrenaline rush

Coming back to those sports. “I like speed, that adrenaline surge when you are speeding. Hence, windsurfing. It’s an indescribable feeling when you are flying along, literally an inch away from the surface of the water. You are one with the equipment and literally skimming the water. It’s such a buzz. I started when I was about 21 and the passion has not waned; the thrill of speeding without getting a ticket.”

The speed theme builds, as he relates the story of how boredom led to an adventure that he has never told his mother about to this day. “It was monsoon season. My friend and I were windsurfing, we got bored and decided to surf to Batam! We started at East Coast Sailing Centre and dashed across the channel, one of the busiest shipping channels in the world. It took us just 45 minutes to get there because of the wind – we’d been travelling at the same speed as the

ferry. When we reached there, we realised that we didn't have our passports, so we sailed back. If the wind had dropped, we would have been goners. That experience was one of the most memorable things I have done in my life."

Then there is downhill skiing. "I try to get my speed fix every year. I also like driving powerful cars, though I am moving away from that and am more interested in classic cars with personality," referring to his beloved 1967 Alfa Romeo Spider.

If this stunning red classic car is a source of joy and pride in his life now, it was a beige denim Levi's jacket that claimed that title when he was in his teens.

"In those days, you couldn't have everything you wanted. But there was a beige Levi's jacket that I had seen. I loved it and dreamed about it and saved up for a whole year to have enough to buy it. I was about 14 years old and it cost \$50, an awesome amount of money then. I proudly wore it on Christmas Eve when we went carolling. So there we were, a group of kids out walking and there was a vagrant sleeping by the roadside. It was a rainy night. I was at the back and saw that he looked cold and miserable. I don't know what came over me but at that point, I took off my jacket, put it on him and kept walking. I was sad because it was the one thing I'd wanted all year long and at the time, was the joy of my life. Years passed and I never thought about it again.

"Thirty years later, it was again Christmas Eve and we were at a friend's house for a party. That night, a school friend who was now a pastor based in Thailand started sharing the Christmas message of giving. And out of the blue he started telling the story of a boy who gave away something that was dear to him to someone he didn't know. When he finished

the story, he said that was the true meaning of Christmas, and told everyone that the boy was sitting in their midst, albeit much older now! I had never realised that he'd seen what I had done; and he had never said anything all this time. That was very touching, and it brought up a memory I hadn't thought of for all those years."

Serendipity

"I believe that we each have a destiny, our own path to take, but it's up to you whether to take it or not. For instance, I had wanted to be a paediatrician but realised that it was not my calling. And then I realised that my talents lay in doing fine work and creating things. Plastic surgery was the perfect avenue for me to put my skills to work creating, recreating, restoring.

"Micro surgery is as fine as it gets; it is the epitome of reconstructive surgery. Stitching up nerves, blood vessels, muscles...that is the ultimate challenge. When you have mastered that, you can branch into breast reconstruction and facial paralysis reconstruction where you need those skills."



Leather Jacket by Paul & Shark

With advanced degrees and training at the Royal Colleges of Edinburgh & Glasgow, and then at the University of Tokyo's Department of Plastic Surgery and Taipei Chang Gung Hospital in Taiwan, Leslie worked in the department of Plastic Surgery in Singapore General Hospital before going into his own solo private practice.

"Reconstructive surgery is a huge field, with challenges such as making someone's crooked face straight again. How much more satisfying can it be? If you can make a disfigurement normal, what a change you have made in that person's life. A woman who has lost a breast to cancer has lost part of her womanhood. Many women try to be brave, and say it doesn't affect them, but how can it not? What a difference you can make to a woman, if you can make a breast for her.

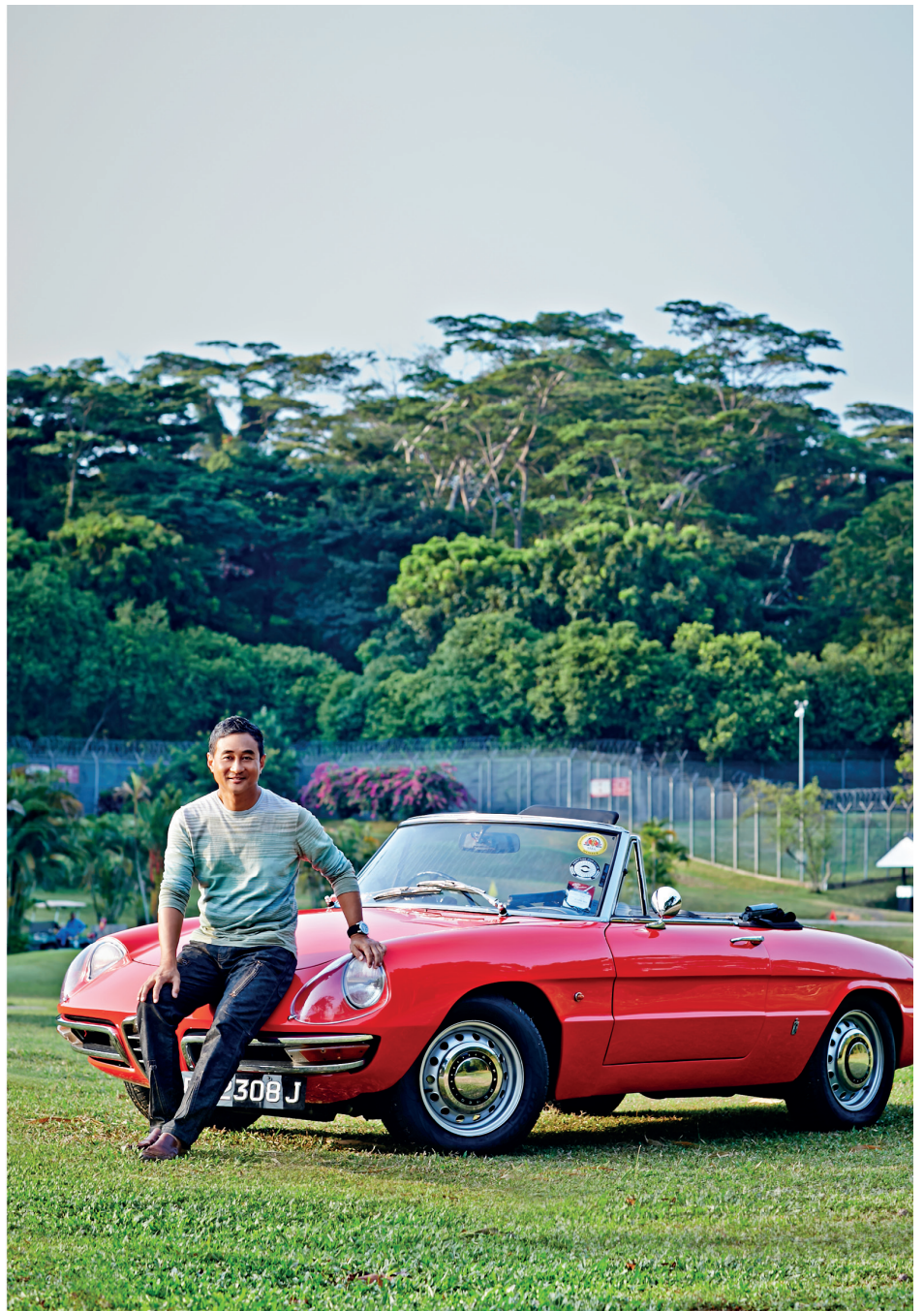
"And that's what spurs me to go beyond routine work. It's definitely an art – using science to create art. If a plastic surgeon doesn't believe that, then he is not a good plastic surgeon."

Although Leslie is not as involved in reconstructive work these days, the work that he does do in the field of cosmetic surgery poses its own unique challenges. "It's no less challenging. You are taking something that is not deformed or damaged and making it even better. So the bar is different and the expectations no less stringent or severe. The patient's expectations are usually even higher, so the pressures can be greater."

As a professional, Leslie has been involved as an advocate for the profession through the Singapore Association of Plastic Surgeons. "When I was elected, I tried to be an advocate for the profession, and still am. For instance, we spoke out against all those who were offering fly-by-night roadside procedures, for instance, beauticians giving silicon injections."

Silicon is not used anymore but these kinds of things are still going on. "We managed to get the government to recognise the problem. They stiffened the procedures and imposed heavier fines and so on, and I'm happy that that happened."

These days, unauthorised people are still doing injections but using things like fake fillers, counterfeit substances and unsterile instruments. And there are, of course, complications



that arise. "We still have to address these issues and continue to be an advocate for safe practices to protect and educate people. We may educate one generation but the next still needs to be informed. That's one of our responsibilities as plastic surgeons."

The big picture

What does he say to critics who have issues with the "crass" commercialisation of plastic surgery? "Plastic surgery in itself is neutral. But who is doing it and what they are doing with it makes the difference. It is not untrue that many people, doctors included, are jumping on the bandwagon of this lucrative industry. They have taken something and created a monster. They put out huge billboards and ads that pander

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to patients’ desires. To me, that is wrong, but nevertheless should not detract from the fact that what we do is important.

“Plastic surgeons have an important role in society; it’s to do with the psychological rehabilitation of people. There are people who are so severely affected by how they look that it has crippled them psychologically, socially, mentally and emotionally. And all that is required is a minor adjustment to get them back on the path of confidence and happiness. Who are we to deny them that?”

“You can counsel them all you want but that’s like you driving a Mercedes and telling someone that their bicycle is just fine. I agree that we should not over-commercialise the aesthetic industry. Far too often in far too many places and by too many people, it has gone that way but I believe that in itself, these are very important services that we provide to those who need them.

“It gives me great satisfaction and a real buzz when my patients come back and you can see from their whole demeanour that they are happy. And it’s not superficial. It’s as if a yoke has been lifted off their shoulders.”

He cites the simple example of someone with bat ears, which can be psychologically problematic for a child if he is subjected to teasing and mockery, the results of which can follow him into adult life. Just a simple surgery to reposition the ear can change their whole life. They can return to school or work confidently with no more fear of ridicule. The same goes for those with a cleft lip.

Principles & legacy

Coming back to those childhood experiences and how they shaped this plastic surgeon.

“There are two things that spur me on to be as good as I can be at whatever I do: first, when I do something, I don’t waste time not doing it well; whatever I embark on, I try to do my best and try to excel in it. If not, then it’s not worth doing. Second, I am fairly competitive. I don’t like to be second best; I don’t like losing.”

Why is gusto so important to this individual? “Each day you live could be your last. And one should not have the hubris to think that you will live until you are 70, 80, 90 years old and say that I can put off what I need to do today till tomorrow. I live life to the max because you can’t predict what the next day will hold for you. And everything needs to have balance. This philosophy has guided me in all my actions.

“I want to be remembered as someone who has made a difference in others’ lives...whether it’s through my work or the way I have related to people as a friend, family member, a doctor. As long as I know that I have been able to make someone’s life better, that’s good enough for me.”