From scaling Island Peak to founding an “Island”

MSc TIP alumni Paul Bao Xuancheng and Mikey Zhu Hao share their story on how they conquered a mountain at their first attempt and founded a company together.

Last year, Paul Bao Xuancheng and Mikey Zhu Hao, alumni from the MSc in Technopreneurship and Innovation Programme’s Class of 2014, conquered a mountain at their first attempt, cemented a lifelong bond, and created an “Island” together.

It all started when Paul, then the owner of a successful chain of travel agencies with an annual turnover of SGD$7.5 million, started to feel that his life was stuck in a boring cycle of working, sleeping and eating.

One night, he shared his idea of climbing Nepal’s 6,189 metre-high Island Peak (Imja Tse) mountain on the social media platform WeChat. Paul’s post received a lot of “Likes” from his friends, but only one person – Mikey, a classmate from NTU’s Master of Science in Technopreneurship and Innovation Programme – showed an interest in making the arduous climb with him.

At the time, Mikey was the youngest CEO of a yacht club in China and also owned a business dealing in wine. But he still felt that there was something missing from his life.

Despite having “zero experience of climbing”, he decided to take the plunge, saying: “At the beginning, I didn’t know how difficult this journey would be. But I think many people dream of scaling the Himalayas, and I decided to go since I had the chance to actually do it.”

Undeterred, the duo went ahead with their climbing expedition.

During their 12-day ascend, they had to brave the cold, with temperatures dropping as low as -20 degrees Celsius, and altitude sickness. There were also new challenges to deal with each time they reached new heights.

Paul recalls how the air got thinner after they had reached an altitude of around 3,400 metres, causing their quality of sleep to deteriorate. At 4,700 metres, he lost both his strength and appetite and began to fear the worst: freezing to death in his sleep.

The night before the duo started their final trek to reach the summit – after reaching the base camp at around the 5,000 metres mark – they made a video recording to capture the moment. Says Mikey: “The outside members did not really support our attempt as they felt it would be too dangerous, they thought I was crazy. Moreover, the movie Everest, based on a tragic true story, was playing in the cinema during that period. Unfortunately, they had all watched the movie.”
temperature was around -20 degrees Celsius and we were shaking in the tent as we filmed ourselves with our GoPro. We realised that if we were to die, those would be the last words we left behind in the world.”

So he and Paul promised each other that, if they were to make it back down the mountain alive, they would build an innovative enterprise that could change the world as well as give their lives a sense of meaning.

They nearly did not get the opportunity to do so.

First, they had to overcome five cliffs that were each about 80 degrees steep. They also found that, nearer to the pinnacle, there were lesser opportunities for them to rest and recover their energy.

Then, during this six-hour climb towards the peak, Mikey slid on the ice and fell backwards, taking Paul – who was connected to him via a rope – with him. Luckily, Paul reacted quickly enough to use his ice-axe to hack into the ice and get a foothold, preventing them from plunging over the cliff just two metres away.

The near-death experience they shared not only united them in a lifelong friendship, it was also an illuminating moment. Says Mikey: “Our climbing experiences made us feel alive, and were a reminder of how precious our time (on Earth) is.”

Inspired, the two launched an IT start-up – Island Peak Innovation – named after the mountain they conquered. Currently, the company has two key projects: an AI (Artificial Intelligence) travel app and a healthcare app.

The AI travel app project has already had some success in getting funding support from Singapore’s National Research Foundation under its IDM Jump-start and Mentor (i.JAM) programme. Island Peak Innovation is also in talks with Chinese authorities to use the app to create “smart-travel cities”.

Apart from developing apps, the company supports other IT start-ups by helping them to set-up their businesses and providing them with seed funding. Says Mikey: “We hope to become a bridge between China and Singapore.”

Paul and Mikey have also bought a space in Singapore for their company which they have named “Island Peak Space”, and have invited other fledging start-ups to share their office and resources for free. Says Paul: “We want to assemble people who share our entrepreneurial spirit. We believe that, when all the positive energy is gathered in this space, we can make a difference in the world.”

As for their hopes for their own business, the ambitious pair hope to achieve a company valuation of SGD$6.189 million by the time Island Peak Innovation goes IPO in five to ten years... a fitting tribute to the time two amateur mountain climbers overcame the 6,189 metres-high Island Peak.

▲ Mikey (left) and Paul taste sweet success after 12 arduous days of braving temperatures as low as -20 degrees Celsius, and altitude sickness.

▲ Catching a breather and taking in the beautiful views at the summit of Island Peak.