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 SUBJECT: Father of 3 outruns his drug-abusing past



Mr Choong, who once crushed his ankles leaping from a flat to escape the police, will run the 21km leg of the triathlon to raise funds for the Yellow Ribbon Project. ST PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

Father of 3 outruns his drug-abusing past

Reformed addict will take part in Ironman race to help raise \$10,000

By KIMBERLY SPYKERMAN

MR HANNIEL Choong had a knack for running - from the cops. With officers from the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) hot on his heels, he once jumped from a third-storey flat to escape them.

He was caught, with both ankles crushed. But Mr Choong is back on his feet and running again, this time with the blessing of the authorities.

The 47-year-old is part of a team which will compete in the Aviva Ironman 70.3 Singapore Triathlon later this month.

The aim: to complete the race in under five hours 15 minutes, the timing set by last year's prisons team.

The reward: Aviva, a leading financial service provider, will give \$10,000 to the Yellow Ribbon Project, a fund to help the rehabilitated mesh into society.

Teaming up with Mr Choong is Mr Kenneth Foo, 31, from the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (Score), who will start the race with the 1.9km

open water swim. Senior prisons officer Mohamed Farik Omar, 39, will then take over with the 90km bike ride, before Mr Choong pounds the remaining 21km on foot to the finish.

Mr Choong credits running for weaning him off an addiction that spanned almost two decades.

Back in 1977, at the age of 15, he was introduced to heroin by the older kids in his Queenstown neighbourhood.

The youngest of five children, he dropped out of school at Primary 6 and began work as a waiter at a restaurant in Shaw Tower. His earnings fuelled his drug habit.

He kept his addiction a secret from his parents by smoking heroin at his friends' homes or at the staircase landing - till officers from the CNB came knocking on their door a few months later.

Mr Choong was carted off to a drug rehabilitation centre, the first of many incarcerations. "I wanted to run my own life...I didn't want to listen to my family. I was young, restless and had no focus."

Being jailed for trafficking did not stop him either. He would ask his father or siblings for money. They did not refuse him as they were unable to bear watching him suffer the drug's withdrawal symptoms.

Even after he crushed his ankles jumping out of the flat in 1983, he had a friend

bring him heroin to smoke while recovering from surgery in hospital.

Peeling off his socks to reveal his slightly misshapen feet, Mr Choong says ruefully: "The big toe on my right foot cannot bend properly any more."

The last time he saw the inside of a drug rehabilitation centre was in 1997, after a stint at halfway house The Helping Hand introduced him to Christianity. "I knew that if I continued on this path back to drugs again, it would lead to destruction. Either I would be sentenced to death one day, or overdose."

Mr Choong, who got married in 2002, now works full-time doing maintenance at a church in Adam Road to support his three young children.

Running calms him. He runs four times a week either at MacRitchie Reservoir or around his home in Sengkang, and has completed four full and three half-marathons, including the adidas Sundown Marathon last year.

Not bad for someone who started running intensively only in 2005.

He said: "There are many ways you can enjoy life fully, and running gives you an aim and a focus. Not like drugs, where there is no focus and no end. When you're running, at least you can focus on achieving something."

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MORE TO THE RACE THAN WINNING

"Winning is not the end state. Completing the race is more important. We want to show that the Yellow Ribbon Project is not successful without someone who is willing to change, a community willing to accept them and prison work."

Mr Kenneth Foo, 31, of the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (Score)

OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW TEAMWORK

"Our thinking is different from the other competitors. They may see it as a competitive thing but we take it as an opportunity to show that these three parties can work together, because we represent different stakeholders in the Yellow Ribbon Project."

Senior prisons officer Mohamed Farik Omar, 39

AN INSPIRING LIFE STORY

"Hannie's life story is truly inspiring and it goes to show that adversities in life can be overcome with self-belief, discipline and support from the people around you. Our support for the Yellow Ribbon Project gives Aviva a chance to recognise the worthwhile efforts of an organisation that helps people who have faced hard times rise to the challenge of creating a better life for themselves. We feel this is a great way to show that, despite past successes or failures, everyone has within them the strength, determination and commitment to take life on for a better future."

Mr Paul Hughes, Aviva's director of strategic development