

THE SINGLE most important factor that has kept Nehemiah Reinforced Soil Sdn Bhd afloat for 16 years in the construction industry is its business entrepreneur Ir Dr Nehemiah Lee's unwavering faith in the impossible.

To be precise, he quips, 'it is faith in God.'

Lee's high work ethics and standards has turned his company into a local market leader in reinforced soil technology. It has won big tender projects involving the design, supply and construction of its own patented proprietary retaining wall known as Nehemiah Wall for bridges on major highways.

But it wasn't easy at first.

With an initial investment of RM200,000 in 1993, which was soon depleted, he received no support from banks, except for an overdraft of RM35,000, despite having a big Public Works Department (PWD) project in Pantai Dalam at hand. 'I had to borrow from my family members,' he says. 'It

was a tough learning curve for me as a business entrepreneur. I had to start with literally nothing but a rented table, a phone and a fax machine.'

SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

In his toughest moments, Lee drew his inspiration from the biography of a Christian missionary to China by the name of Hudson Taylor, who faced what seemed to be humanly insurmountable obstacles, yet persisted in reaching the interiors of China. 'From this one man, I learnt to put my faith in God to provide,' Lee explains.

Since Day One, Lee has made it a policy 'to conduct business with integrity'. In the construction industry, this was a big challenge. There were difficult situations where he was tempted to compromise. 'We lost some jobs, but bigger jobs paid off,' he admits. 'In retrospect, some jobs that we lost turned out to be problematic.'

His competitors were spreading rumours in the market that any wall that Nehemiah built would collapse.

TOUGH BEGINNINGS

The former General Manager of Hume Industries Bhd tells why he decided to start his own company. 'Bribery was so rampant in the construction industry,' he recalls. 'I wanted full control over the way we conduct our business with integrity.'

It was tough for the first two years. Together with his partner, Eugene Oh, they worked very hard. 'By God's grace, jobs were coming our way. We managed to secure quite a number of projects from the PWD. It is a delight to work with the people in the PWD who are professional and ethical in their work,' he says.

When business peaked, Oh was diagnosed with cancer and passed away in 1999. Lee had to decide between taking in new partners and grooming his young engineers to take over Oh's role.

'I never regret making that decision, although it was a lot tougher decision to groom young engineers,' he admits. Today, both Ir Tan Cheng Chong and Jason Khor together with his daughter, Deborah Lee, are managing the business with some 60 employees.

For the past 16 years, the company has recorded profits, except in the first year. 'This is my encouragement to other business entrepreneurs that, if we continue to strive to maintain our integrity, the hard work will eventually bear fruits,' he says.

FAITH CAN MOVE MOUNTAINS

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Lee (seen here with his wife): The family, to me, is more important than my business

To date, it has completed nearly 15% of the MMC-Gamuda double tracking project from Ipoh to Padang Besar, which is due for completion by 2012. It has also worked on numerous other major projects, namely, the Duta-Ulu Kelang Highway (DUKE), Lebuhraya Kemuning-Shah Alam (LKSA), Lebuhraya Kajang-Seremban Phase 1 and 2 (LEKAS), KL-Putrajaya Highway and SMART Tunnel.

TRIBUTE TO HIS MOTHER

The father of three grown-up daughters, Lee attributes his success to his mother, Lau Phek Tin, a teacher at Kahang New Village Chinese Primary School near Kluang, Johor, who single-handedly raised six sons (Lee is the fourth son) and one daughter. His father, Lee Seng Ghee, passed away when he was about three years old.

'I got a lot of pressure from her to succeed in life. Sometimes, it was almost unbearable, but we didn't want to disappoint her,' he recalls. 'As a

family, we were very poor. We could hardly make ends meet. We could have followed the norm in the village, but we were fortunate that after Standard Six, instead of being sent to tap rubber, we were sent outside the village to get a secondary school education. My mother wanted us to get out of the cycle of poverty.'

Lau (86), is a very sharp woman. 'If she had not been a teacher, she could have been a very good businesswoman. She was always looking for additional income streams, such as giving tuition to the village kids. Or, she and her sister who used to work in Singapore would, during the Chinese New Year festive season, perm hair for the villagers. With the money she earned, she purchased plantation land, grew some rubber trees and subsequently sold them off at a profit,' Lee recalls. 'Together with my stepfather, who was also a very hardworking man, they sent all of us to university.'

Reflecting his early childhood, now,

Lee himself spends a few hours in the afternoon once a week giving free tuition to underprivileged school children as part of his social work. His wife, Wendy, a law graduate, also teaches English to children from poor families.

The couple met at a student camp in Penang in 1976, and two years later, decided to tie the knot. 'She takes care of everything at home so that I can focus on my business. She also becomes a sounding board to me.'

Their eldest daughter, Deborah, 28, has joined Nehemiah as the Finance Manager, while Song Ai, 25, is doing a Masters in Clinical Psychology with Deakin University, and youngest daughter, Joanna, 19, is pursuing her International Baccalaureate, hoping to do European languages.

A father, a disciplinarian and a counsellor at home, he hopes to mould his children to become people who love God and have high integrity. 'The family, to me, is more important than my business,' he admits. **mb**

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Business entrepreneur Ir Dr Nehemiah Lee's unwavering faith in the impossible helped him achieve great success in his chosen profession, despite coming from an impoverished background. But it wasn't easy.

BY STEPHEN NG

Lee: Faith in God is all-important