Being a school dropout did not stop Mr Sim Eng Tong from forging ahead to become the CEO of Biomax Technologies.

by lynn seah

TENACITY, humility and a willingness to learn and innovate are traits Mr Sim Eng Tong embodies, as these qualities have taken him a long way in life.

A Primary 5 dropout who could barely speak English, he is today the chief executive officer (CEO) of Biomax Technologies, the company that has developed a technology to convert organic waste into fertiliser within 24 hours.

This year, he is one of the winners of The Entrepreneur of the Year Award (EYA) in the Established Entrepreneur category.

It had been a long haul for the 61-year-old to reach this level of success.

"From the age of 19, I started various business ventures and had my fair share of successes and failures," he says.

But his never-say-die attitude kept him going.

"An entrepreneur must be willing to take risks. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

"Entrepreneurs should also be highly resilient. You can never succeed if you give up after the first few failures," he adds.

The right catalyst

While working in the food trading business in China, Mr Sim got the germ of an idea that would eventually become Biomax.

Observing the large amount of waste generated by food factories, he challenged Dr Puah Chum Mok – a microbiologist he met through a mutual friend – to develop an enzyme that could convert the waste into fertiliser in 24 hours.

It took five years but they succeeded, and Biomax Technologies was born in 2000, with Mr Sim as CEO, Dr Puah as chief technology officer and a third business partner, Ms Fion Chua, as deputy CEO.

But the early years of the company were not plain sailing. It could not secure any customers at first, and there were cash flow problems.

Still, Mr Sim pressed on.

"Starting your own business is never easy but the worst thing you can do is to give up even before you try," he says.

"I firmly believed that we have a solid product and that the company would ultimately be profitable."

And things did turn around. The company has now sold its waste treatment technology to firms in 15 countries around the world.

Its clients include poultry farmers, palm oil millers, food-processing factories, slaughterhouses, and biogas and wastewater treatment plants.

The bulk of its customers are overseas, where there is more agricultural activity.

However, the company is also looking into collaborating with local hotels and restaurants to treat their organic waste such as food and paper waste.

"We will continue to invest in research and development with regards to creating green products to conserve the environment," says Mr Sim.

The company has a couple of new technologies in the pipeline, which it will launch in due course.

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-- Mr Sim Eng Tong (above), chief executive officer, Biomax Technologies

Staying ahead with R&D

Research and development (R&D) is very important to the company.

"Since we are a biotechnology company, we have to stay ahead of technology at all times by constantly advancing our products with the help of our R&D team," he says.

"We have invested significant resources in R&D, so it is also crucial to protect our technologies with patents in order to build up a high barrier entry."

While protective of its intellectual property, the company also believes in imparting knowledge to the youth.

It holds sharing sessions with students from local institutions on entrepreneurship, recycling and sustainability practices, and has even placed one of its digestor machines in a local primary school to support the school’s environmental initiative to treat food waste from its canteen.

Mr Sim hopes that winning the EYA can serve as an inspiration as well.

He says: "If someone like me with little formal education is able to start a green technology company, young entrepreneurs can achieve so much more as long as they possess the passion and the drive to do so."

"I believe that life is an endless journey of learning. Even though I am 61 years old now, I am still learning new things every day."

"I find opportunities to learn from my clients, colleagues and business partners so that I may apply those lessons to our Biomax business and technology."