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Low's high on social work

Daniel Low wants to make an impact on people's lives, succeeding first in Uganda and now in Malaysia. **SANTHA OORJITHAM** is impressed

Over its 15 years, PIE has helped about 800 local families within the Klang Valley — and 98 to 99 per cent of the loans have been repaid

“WHY are you taking my

grandchildren to Uganda?” asked Daniel Low's father.

It was 1999 and Low was giving up his job as managing director of a company in Singapore — with a five-figure salary, a company Mercedes 280 SEL and company entertainment account.

Good question. Low had had a conversion experience and no longer wanted a 9-to-5 job.

“Helping the poor and impacting on their lives is more meaningful,” says the 51-year-old today.

He passed his shares in the Singapore company to his father and decided he wanted to transfer technology to Uganda.

Within a fortnight, he learned how to make liquid soap, waterless hand cleaner, shampoo, sealant and degreaser.

Low and his wife Vivienne set up a cottage industry in Kampala with S\$100,000 (RM240,000). They trained 15 Ugandans to manufacture

and sell the products.

In the first year, they made a sales turnover of about RM30,000 and Low paid himself a three-figure salary.

Part of the profits funded an orphanage and education for children whose parents had died of AIDS.

The Malaysian couple set up a football club with the slum children and their son Timothy trained with them.

Driving across Uganda in a Nissan pickup, Low also co-ordinated micro-economic development projects for 300 churches set up by Singapore's Victory Family Centre, opening kindergartens and nurseries and providing micro-loans of about RM100 for people to start small businesses and buy livestock.

Within six years, the company was making RM100,00 in sales turnover and Low was able to earn a four-figure salary.

But his father asked him to return to Malaysia as all his brothers were living abroad.

So he sold the company for a “token sum” and returned to Kuala Lumpur five years ago, to become manager of Partners in Enterprise (PIE), a non-profit micro-finance agency that provides interest-free business capital for households earning less than RM2,000 per month.

His working experience in Malaysia (where he set up a small shop selling cassettes and records in the mid-1980s), Britain (where he studied marketing, met his wife and worked in warehouses, wholesale and clothing retail), Singapore and Uganda has prepared him for his present job.

“Living in four countries teaches you about human nature, culture and attitudes, how to adjust and accommodate to different lifestyles

and businesses,” he says.

He trains people in book-keeping, stocktaking and business improvement and helps them set up savings accounts.

Mogana Balakrishnan, for example, borrowed RM3,114 to buy an “edging” machine to finish the raw edges on the clothes, uniforms and curtains she sews after her day job at a factory in Selayang.

She can already make between RM900 and RM2,000 a month and plans to quit her job at the factory to open her own tailor shop. She expects her income to double.

“We never loan the full amount so that they take responsibility and have ownership,” Low explains.

Clients can borrow up to RM5,000 and make weekly payments.

They also have to provide some form of collateral, such as the registration card of a motorcycle.

Over its 15 years, PIE has helped about 800 local families within the Klang Valley — and 98 to 99 per cent of the loans have been repaid.

This year, the United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR, asked PIE to help with sustainable development projects for about 20 refugees, mostly Rohingya from Myanmar.

Low now makes a four-figure salary and drives a Proton Iswara. He puts in at least eight hours per day, sometimes working at night.

“If you take it as a job, you won't last long,” he says. “You have to like people, to listen to their problems with their family, business and children's education. You counsel them and become their friends.”

He admits he couldn't have afforded his own children's education without support from his wife, who is now the principal of a

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private kindergarten, and his father.

But it looks like he has inspired another generation: Timothy, now doing his A-levels in England, wants to go back to his "roots" in Uganda and work with youth in sports.

And daughter Hannah, now studying geography at the National University of Singapore, plans to do disaster and post-disaster work.

"She wants something exciting, adventurous and impacting life," says Low proudly. She sounds just like her father.

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Low helped Mogana Balakrishnan to expand her tailoring business