

When Khunapong Khunaraksa was born - two months prematurely - his parents endowed him with a Thai name. Its meaning: someone who does good work in society.

Khunapong lived up to his namesake recently when he was awarded the leadership in Community and Advocacy award at the inaugural 40 Under 40: Most Influential Asian-Australian Awards, held in Melbourne.

For Khunapong, 33, this award goes far beyond recognition for his professional contributions to improving clean water accessibility in Southeast Asia. It's about coming full circle.

The boy who didn't belong

Born in Sydney, Khunapong moved to Bangkok when he was seven and has since moved between Thailand and Australia for study and work, between sojourns in the U.S and other Southeast Asian countries.

But the nomadic lifestyle, combined with a series of disruptive life events, left Khunapong questioning his sense of belonging.

When his mother was pregnant with Khunapong, she was diagnosed with a large brain tumour that threatened both their lives. Even though it reduced her chances of survival, she waited until Khunapong was healthy enough for a premature birth before undergoing surgery.

Though the surgery was ultimately a success, complications left her with severe disabilities along the right side of her body. She was unable to walk, write, or even feed herself.

It wasn't the first medical emergency the Khunaraksa family dealt with; Khunapong's older brother was born with a rare liver disease that gave him little chance of survival beyond ten years. His parents spent more than AU\$1 million on treatment for him in Japan over a two year period.

Khunapong jokes that had it not been for these events, his parents may have been multi-millionaires. His father ran a successful Thai restaurant in Bondi Beach which quickly won recognition as one of the top three Thai restaurants in Sydney. His mother was the first Thai woman to join the Qantas team in Sydney.

"My dad was very successful in Australia," Khunapong says. "Then all these events he couldn't control happened to him and he simply embraced the situation and just tried to make it work."

After her surgery, Khunapong's mother was unable to return to work. "My father took over the finances of the restaurant but he wasn't in the right state of mind to deal with it all and we lost everything."

At the age of seven, Khunapong's family uprooted and moved to Bangkok. His parents divorced and he found himself untethered, in a school where he couldn't speak the language and where the other children called him a *farang*, or foreigner.

Just as he was starting high school, Khunapong's dad passed away. Five years later, his older brother finally succumbed to his illness and died - outliving the doctor's prognosis by 12 years. In 2015, the same year Khunapong moved briefly to the U.S with his American wife, his mother died of a stroke.

Reflecting on his childhood, Khunapong recognises that while he never had a strong Asian-Australian role model, his parents were his heroes and passed their innovative spirit onto him.

Realising his deepest challenges were his greater strengths

Overcoming each unique challenge during his childhood inadvertently shaped Khunapong to become a leader in his career.

Living in both Australia and Thailand, Khunapong was exposed to extremes in water crises, from the hard droughts of Australia to the severe floods in Thailand. These experiences ignited his passion for water.

Since becoming a water leader in the Asian Pacific region, Khunapong has impacted over 300,000 Southeast Asians by helping to improve clean water accessibility.

He spent almost four years developing Water.org's first urban water utility program, which by October 2020 will deliver clean, piped water to estimated over one million people in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Cambodia. In 2017, he received the Water.org Innovator Award for his efforts.

Khunapong acknowledges that his experiences in Australia, the U.S, and Thailand contributed to his successful collaboration with local Asian communities.

"In Southeast Asia, I know how to adapt to work with people from different backgrounds and cultures," he says. "I understand how things work because I was in their shoes, I've experienced the culture and protocol first-hand."

But Khunapong hasn't always been confident in his abilities. "I used to doubt myself a lot and feel like I'm not good enough," he recalls. "Early in my career, I thought it was bad to be different and to fail. When you stand out, you start thinking, 'am I good enough?'"

"But over time, I learned to believe in myself," he says. "I see failure now as my best friend and I live by the words of Elon Musk: if things are not failing, you are not innovating enough. That's my mantra."

Today, Khunapong is serving on the board of non-profit organisation Gravity Water. He is also a leading clean water consultant helping global water startups expand across Southeast Asia.

Today, he turns his differences into his greatest strength by combining Eastern and Western ways of thinking.

He knows how to adapt to Asian protocol and procedures, concepts of face saving, and showing delicacy when expressing opinions. Yet his work in Australia and the U.S has taught him to be innovative, push boundaries, and become familiar with failure.

"Being able to call the U.S, Australia, and Southeast Asia home gives me a more complete understanding of the context of the issues in international programs, compared to those who have only ever belonged to one culture."

Having something in common with the people he has dedicated himself to helping also comes with its own benefits.

"I believe in localisation. The solutions that often work in Australia or the U.S are not necessarily going to work in Asia," he says. "My job involves tailoring the solution to the community and getting them to really own it. And I think there's less resistance to me than there would be to someone from Australia or the U.S."

Winning the 40 Under 40 Award for Community and Advocacy

For a man who has struggled with identity and belonging, winning the 40 Under 40 Asian-Australian Community and Advocacy award feels like a homecoming.

"What popped up in my head after winning the award is that I'm coming full circle back to Australia," he says. "I was born in Sydney and grew up here but I don't feel like I belong here. I don't feel like I fully belong in Thailand either."

“Now I’m back in Australia but I’m happy to consider myself a global citizen,” he smiles. “It’s funny that it took me 33 years to figure this out.”

Khunapong spent years trying to make sense of the events he had to face so early in life. But he’s learned to embrace these challenges as essential steps that would shape him as the successful entrepreneur he is today.

“It’s a bit like what the Asians refer to as a sleeping tiger,” he explains. “You have a spirit within you that you don’t realise exists. And as you grow up, different experiences bring it out. With my brother’s illness and my mother’s disability, I had to be the strong family member. Now I’m the only one left. My true fearless innovator spirit was revealed and it shined.”

Khunapong is on a mission to help all Southeast Asians have access to clean water. If you are interested in collaborating with him, contact him at khunapong@gmail.com.