

## IREKA CORP - LAI SIEW WAH &amp; LAI VOON HON



“ One must take calculated risks. Those who don't will not go far ”

**T**HE people who came before us are very important. A figure Lai Voon Hon most admires is his father, Lai Siew Wah. Despite being a very private man, with hardly any praises for his children, the patriarch and group managing director of Ireka Corp Bhd commands a deep respect from Voon Hon and his siblings.

“It is his presence and the quiet way he goes about doing things,” says Voon Hon and as the afternoon sun begins its journey west, the executive director and first-born of five children relates why.

“He is amazing. Despite his traditional and difficult childhood, he approached fatherhood from a very modern perspective. He gave equal opportunities to his children and he is always encouraging us. When we were about to embark on a choice of career, he would say ‘this is fine’ and he would tell us his point of view. It is up to us to decide if we want to go ahead. In other words, he gave us the freedom to express ourselves, without having to conform. I appreciate him greatly for this,” says Voon Hon.

An example is when they made the decision to build Westin in Jalan Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur. “I wanted to build a five-star hotel, which is unusual, given the tight space. Normally, a five-star would have more land, but he gave me the freedom to do what I believe in and that includes getting the right operators for the hotel. That shows he is willing to accept new ideas.”

It was a proud moment for both when the hotel was launched, not only because it

was a joint-effort but more so because it was hard times, the 1997/98 financial crisis and soon after that, the SARS (Severe acute respiratory syndrome) outbreak. (The hotel was sold for RM455mil last year, or RM1mil a room, setting a record in the local property scene).

Voon Hon says there have been disagreements but these are healthy debates and the respect he has for his father's experience and sincerity remains.

His father, Siew Wah, 67, is very much a self-made man. His grandfather, Siew Wah's dad, was a poor tin miner who died when Siew Wah, the second in a family of four children, was 10. The lad and his older sister had to quit school to help mother, who was a rubber tapper. The two younger brothers and sister continued schooling.

What that really means is that Siew Wah, at the fragile and joyful age of 10, was laden with responsibilities far too big for his age; he had to contribute to the family's income. With no formal schooling, he learnt through the school of hard knocks.

Siew Wah became a machine repair apprentice - a very inquisitive and innovative one. When he was 13 or 14, he wanted to own a tractor. He worked hard and tough; he scoured areas for work and went deep into the plantation estates or jungle (where no one wanted to go) to find repair jobs. With the money earned, he bought a machine and leased it out and gradually moved into sub-contracting work. He became known in Kuala Lumpur as ‘lai

wong’ (earth king) - a play on the family name. He became a well-known and skilled ‘earth-mover’.

Interestingly, the Sg Besi tin mine, an open cast mine, was one of his projects. He was in his 20s then and learnt English from the British who ran the mines.

He also started sole proprietorship Syarikat Lai Siew Wah, a precursor to Ireka. When the government started the North-South Toll Expressway, he went into big time contracting work because he had done it during the Japanese Occupation.

Later, Siew Wah listed the company but wanted a name that would have an international appeal. He had a company called Reka Construction Sdn Bhd. “We sat down and put the ‘I’ in front of ‘reka’ which is ‘create’ in Bahasa Malaysia.

“He inspires me to strive harder. He shares his knowledge and experience and at the same time, continues to learn and catch up with modern times. He is a very private person and does not share his feelings. My grandmother, whom I am closed to, loved him dearly. She would regale us with stories about our dad when I was young and that's how I grew to admire him. My dad did not tell us these things. Grandma told us how he single-handedly changed the family fortune. It is these stories that made me want to help my father after my education. I promised my grandmother that I will help him in whatever way I can. If it were not for her, we would be taking a lot of things for granted.”

Voon Hon and his siblings left Kuala Lumpur to study in Singapore. He was then 15 and the youngest was three. His grandmother looked after them in the republic. His father would often travel to Singapore for visits and they would go abroad for their annual holidays.

“Dad has been a great mentor. He is always striving for the best. He always says one must take calculated risks. People who don't will not go far. But he never believed in gambling.

“When I was younger, he would take me on site visits and say ‘one day, you will built something better than this, or that.’ When I applied for civil engineering, he took me aside and asked me why I wanted to be an engineer. ‘Have you not gone for enough site visits to see my engineers working under the sun? Why don't you become an architect?’ “He had used his soft approach and I am glad I heeded his advice. In the early days, I would tell him that I am receiving this award or that, and he would come. He never praised us but I could see that he was very proud of me and that motivated me to do better. His presence showed that we mattered to him.

“My dad had a sort of power on me which is difficult to explain. As an architecture student, long hair and ponytail was the in-thing. But I knew he would not approve. “The other thing he taught by example is his humility. From the driver and coffee lady to the managers, he jokes with them” - **By THEAN LEE CHENG**