Where did TULA come from?

How a Filipino-Australian gave up a high-flying career to transform Filipino education

James Centenera is the 29-year-old Filipino-Australian CEO and co-founder of TULA. TULA is a new chain of innovative learning centers that opened in Makati and Pasig in 2015. It plans to expand across the country, providing thousands of children with the extra academic boost they need to do well in school and also the character, attitude, and skills they need to succeed in their future. But who is James and how did TULA come about?

James’ story started on a chicken farm in South Australia, where he was raised by hard-working Filipino parents. And although neither of his parents finished university, James was awarded a scholarship to go to one of the best Australian universities to study Engineering. Whilst at university, James was recruited to become a management consultant with McKinsey and Company, the most prestigious management consultancy in the world. James’ career at McKinsey took off as he flew across the globe on a regular basis advising leaders in a variety of industries.

But despite the success, James was restless. A summer in Nepal nagged at him. As a volunteer teacher, he realized the power education had on poverty. And it increasingly seemed unfair to him that education largely was driven by where you were born. He thought, had his parents not settled in Australia, he may have ended up in a much more difficult situation. This didn’t feel right and he felt obliged to do something.
Back at McKinsey, James worked hard to learn more about education and eventually met Fenton Whelan, now his co-founder at TULA. Fenton recruited James to help improve education systems in Pakistan alongside global education expert, Sir Michael Barber.

Not long after, Sir Michael joined Pearson, the world’s leading learning company, and he asked James to join. James spearheaded Pearson’s efforts in Asia to make high-quality schooling more affordable. Inspired by the rapid growth and potential of the Filipino, James came looking for an opportunity in the Philippines. In 2012, thanks to James’ efforts, Pearson and Ayala joined forces and formed APEC Schools, a chain of affordable high schools.

But then in 2015, after several years leading operations at APEC, James took a leap of faith. He gave up his executive salary, secure job, and corporate career to set up a social enterprise dedicated to reinventing education. Why? Because he realized schools are important, but education needs to evolve a lot more to truly give every child the chance they deserve to succeed.

In April 2015, TULA was born to transform the after-school learning space and teach more than just traditional subject knowledge. James quickly found company and was joined by Fenton, his former McKinsey colleague, as well as dedicated graduates from Ateneo, LaSalle, and UP, who similarly gave up their safe corporate careers to pursue this passion to create a new way of learning.

TULA is just starting but already serves hundreds of Filipino children with its new way of learning from its Makati and Pasig centers. At TULA, children develop the character, attitude, skills, and knowledge they need to succeed, and in a fun, interesting way. So hopefully one day, these children will have even greater opportunities than the ones James had.

TULA branches are open every weekend and on select weekdays, from 10am to 6pm. You can learn more by visiting www.facebook.com/TULaphilippines or inquire about a free trial by emailing ask@tulaphilippines.com