



**Q: Can you tell me about yourself? What is your background?**

**Tan:** I studied Marine Engineering in Singapore and was in the engineering field for over a decade. I started off as an engineer, modifying submarines that were brought back to Singapore before moving on to Rolls-Royce to work on their marine propulsion system.

Later on, I got an opportunity to work in China for a furniture company. I was designing furniture, such as coffee tables. I left after three years and came back to Singapore without a plan on what to do next.

All these experiences helped me in the creation of products for Agegracefully.





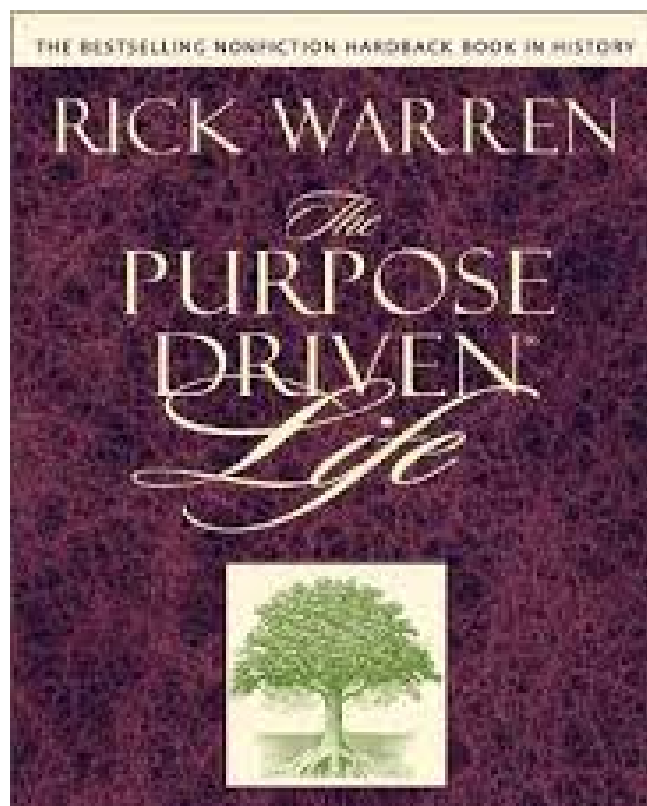
Q: How did you start Agegracefully?

**Tan:** I came across a book called “The Purpose Driven Life” by Pastor Rick Warren. Through prayers, while I was reading this book, I received a message to help the elderlies.

At first, I had no knowledge about this industry, and I knew no one. I volunteered at the eldercare center to find out more about the elderly and the industry in general. As my consciousness grew for the elderlies, I also started to observe them on purpose.

When you pay more attention to certain things, you can see more and catch on a lot of things that you never knew were there before. Prior, when I see elderlies, they are just people passing by. Now when an elderly passes me, a lot of questions pop into my head. What are they wearing? What are they using? Who is with them? Where are they heading? These are just some of the questions that I ask now.

During these observation periods, I felt that there’s a lot that we can do for the elderly.





## Products vs Services for Elderly

I noticed there are two main areas that I can help the elderly with.

The first one being the “product” and the second is the “service”. I chose to focus on developing products because of my previous experience in engineering and design.

I initially wanted to design furniture for the elderly, but I don't have enough savings and storage space to create and keep big furniture. And so I started exploring the possibility of creating smaller and cheaper products so that I can save on rental fee and manpower.

There were two turning points for me.

The first one was my visit to one of the rehabilitation (“rehab”) shops in a hospital and mothercare shops that sell maternity and infant products.

The environment between the two gave off very different vibes. Shopping in rehab shops is very depressing, and it makes me feel that ageing is very upsetting. On the other hand, everything in the mothercare shops looked very cute and nice. Even though they seem to be very different, there are many similarities between the two.

Babies wear diapers, have chairs or walkers with wheels and use specially made spoons and water bottles to help them feed themselves. In the elderly space, they have very similar products as well. Both eldercare and mothercare shops sell functional products but the eldercare shops took a medical approach whereas the mothercare shops took a lifestyle approach and made products that are more appealing to the eyes.

The second one is my volunteer job at the eldercare centre. My job is to make sure that the elderly don't fall, because when an elderly falls, there would be lots of issues. I would basically bring them to the toilet, bring them food, and talk to them. I could talk not only to the elderly, but also to their caregivers and the staff there. This gave me an opportunity to know more about the elderly.

These two turning points have made it clear to me that the product that we create should be about lifestyle.

## Lifestyle of The Elderly

For example, in some places, a pregnant lady will most likely just wear an oversized t-shirt and that is good enough to cover the body. But in some other places, people who are more well off tend to want to enjoy the experience of the whole pregnancy process, so they would spend a lot of money on designer maternity wear and premium, nice-looking baby gadgets to improve this transitional experience of their life that are not so much about functionality.

The focus on designs that provide more than just the basic functions of a product allowed me to see a business opportunity in the elderly's lifestyle segment and who my target clients are.

My short-term goal is to help elderly people who have just retired, who do not need a wheelchair, but need some help with walking.

After discussing with my wife about me going into the elderly business, she wholeheartedly supported me. So that is how I started my business by designing walking sticks.

## Interchangable Base Design





**Q:** How are your walking sticks different from other walking sticks?

**Tan:** We put in a lot of thoughts into designing. We care about the aesthetics besides the product being elder-friendly.

The base of our walking stick is designed to be interchangeable. Our most common base for the walking stick is called a quad base, which has four legs and they come in different sizes. No matter what size they are, they are all interchangeable.

For example, if your physiotherapist tells you that you need a walking stick with a bigger base to provide steadier support because of your hip injury, you can just simply replace the base with a larger one, without having to get a new walking stick. A few months down the road, when you have recovered from your injury, you can change the base of your walking stick back to a smaller one for better aesthetics and convenience.

**Q:** Have you incorporated any technology or design from your previous experience into your walking sticks?

**Tan:** When I was in my submarine job, I did a lot of material testing. This skill came in very handy as materials are a major consideration when designing products for elderly. A walking stick is something that they hold and carry every day, so it has to be light enough. There are a lot of challenges when it comes to deciding which materials to use, for example, it's easy to say that titanium is the go-to material to use because of its lightweight, but the downside is that it is expensive.

Ergonomics is fundamental for elderly products, and weight is one of the most challenging when it comes to designing these products - something that I was never concerned about when I was in engineering and furniture design. It's very tough to even reduce just 50 grams of weight from a product.

Let's use an umbrella for example. You may think that having an umbrella that also has a chair attached to it is a simple and genius concept, where the elderly can use it during rainy days and transform it into a chair anytime when they feel tired. But imagine them having to carry it around, all the add-ons, extra components are going to make the product bulky and heavy. It's

very challenging to create something that is multi-functional without compromising certain qualities.

## The Systematic Approach

The other thing is that I designed the walking stick in a systematic way. It is the same approach that I have used during my engineering and furniture designing days. For example, for furniture design, we design with a system in mind. We don't only design a coffee table, but we also design a matching TV console, side table, and many other related products, so all the different pieces of furniture are more in line aesthetically. People will be more comfortable buying a matching collection compared to buying different designed pieces.

I applied this same approach when designing the elderly walking stick. We have six different designs in terms of the body itself, such as the chair, the umbrella, and the foldable body, and we have different kinds of accessories such as handles and bases that are all interchangeable. So everything is part of the system.

**Q:** If you were to design elder-friendly furniture later on, how would it be different from regular furniture?

**Tan:** At the back of my head I want to create elder-friendly furniture, but I don't want to categorize it that way, I want it to be about lifestyle.

People don't want to be in the 'old folks' zone, where they feel like they are getting themselves medical products. So the idea is to age gracefully, which is why we name ourselves that. Right now, the elderly chairs that you see in the market, also called geriatric chairs, look similar to the ones you see in hospitals. The colour is often solid and the existing designs give people the impression that it's either for the elderly or people with disabilities. I want to be able to remove such impressions for the elderly sector eventually.

For example, I want the chairs to look like normal chairs with all the basic features, but also elder-friendly and aesthetically pleasing.

I imagine that all the elderly furniture in a house radiates a welcoming and comforting ambience that can also be used in a convenient way for the elderly.

**Q:** What are your next steps? Are we looking forward to any new and exciting products?

**Tan:** The next possible product would be an upgrade of the walking stick with a seat, with the potential use of carbon fibre to make the product lighter.

Another possible upgrade is our foldable walking stick. We want it to be a convertible stick, so that it can be used as a hiking stick as well. Some customers have asked us whether we can install some spikes on it so it can be used to walk on snow, and we are seriously considering that.

**Q:** What are your interests? Anything interesting about you?

**Tan:** I used to enjoy cycling and photography a lot, but ever since I started my own business, I have been doing less of these activities. My passion for what I do has consumed a lot of my time.