

PRESS STATEMENT FROM THE TOTE BOARD

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TOTE BOARD SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE SOCIAL SERVICE SECTOR

THEY share one appealing thing in common: To bring a refreshing smile to the lesser fortunate.

Special need-educationist June Tham-Toh Syn Yuen and medical specialist Ramaswamy Akhileswaran are class acts in their own rights.

Passionately devoted to their selfless work, their biggest joy comes when the faces of their clients light up as they seek out their life-long ambition of helping the needy.

After devoting more than quarter of a century to educating children with special needs, which she describes as "very fulfilling and emotional work", Mrs Tham, 57, a mother of two, is now fired to do more after returning from a week-long Singapore Totalisator Board (Tote Board)-sponsored scholarship at the Harvard Business School in Boston, USA.

"I've returned truly rejuvenated. I'm more courageous to think a lot more out of the cap to do better for needy kids," says Mrs Tham, the Executive Director of Rainbow Centre, a voluntary welfare organisation, which runs two special schools with early intervention programmes for over 700 kids with autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, Down Syndrome and multiple disabilities, from two months to 18 years.

Likewise for Dr Akhileswaran, a specialist in radiation oncology and palliative medicine, who described the week-long Harvard assignment - Strategic Perspectives in Nonprofit Management (SMNM) Programme - as "my best learning experience".

The two Singaporeans got the chance to interact with 143 multi-lingual managers of non-profit social-work organisations, through Tote Board's inaugural overseas scholarship.

Mrs Tham said: “It challenged me professionally, intellectually and personally after being exposed to a world-class learning experience with international leaders in the non-profit sector. I felt so proud to be an ambassador for Rainbow Centre with a great opportunity to learn and to rise to the occasion.”

Praising the Tote Board sponsorship, Mrs Tham and Dr Akhileswaran appreciated that the Tote Board valued the enhancing of leadership in the non-profit social sector.

Mrs Tham noted: “The Tote Board must be commended. The launch of this scholarship to improve leadership and management of voluntary welfare organisations is timely and a significant contribution, which not only recognises the importance of effective leadership in non-profit organisations but helping leaders in the social service sector to build high-performance organisations.”

For Dr Akhileswaran, 50, a father of two, who is the Chief Executive Officer and Medical Director of HCA Hospice Care (which runs the largest hospice homecare service, looking after 75 per cent of hospice patients in Singapore): “It’s like winning a lottery...a once-in-a-lifetime experience!”

“I found the one-week Harvard stint so mentally stimulating, sharpening my analytical skills. Very challenging, too, especially since I’m in the midst of doing my MBA in HealthCare Management at the National University of Singapore.”

Dr Akhileswaran, a Bangalore-born doctor who came to Singapore in 2001 with his pathologist-wife, has been credited for turning HCA around financially, salvaging it from the verge of closure when he joined as the Medical Director seven years ago.

Now a Singapore citizen, his long-term dream is to make HCA a “world-class hospice” with heartfelt palliative care.

Palliative care, for the record, is the special care of a person whose disease cannot be cured. It provides comfort and support to the person and family. Palliative care does not hasten or delay death.

Dr Akhileswaran, who has widely travelled and lived in USA, Britain and France the past two decades, said poignantly:

“Palliative medicine is not a glamorous field as you deal with dying patients...the recognition has been slow and there’s little room for big profits.

“But I get tremendous satisfaction when these patients smile and their faces light up seeing you...and that makes your day.”

The Harvard date made both Mrs Tham and Dr Akhileswaran appreciate that running a non-profit organisation is like running a business.

Social enterprise is the buzz word for the non-profit sector now, said Mrs Tham, who joined the Margaret Drive Special School as its Principal and Executive Director in 1989. The school came under the umbrella of Rainbow Centre in 1992, when the latter was founded.

“Non-profit agencies are now becoming social enterprises adopting entrepreneurial approaches to create more social value with limited resources,” she said.

“From branding, marketing, production, human resource, public relation, customer satisfaction to sound financial management. These are crucial attributes to a successful organisation.”

She admitted, on a personal note, looking at the recent radical changes in fund-raising and fund-management in Singapore, that it will be a “challenge for voluntary welfare organisations to run its business like a profit organisation”.

“However, setting up social enterprises within one’s organisation is not an impossible option as long as it complies with the legal framework and the mission is clear with a social value and impact on the constituencies.”

Mrs Tham, who has devoted 26 years to educating children with special needs, advocates the Harvard Business School principle that “learning is a life-long affair and age is not barrier”.

“The oldest participant was 68 and the average age of the 143 participants was 48. They came with rich experiences working with non-profit organisations in USA, Europe, Africa and Asia,” she said.

The Tote Board has selected another three prominent social-work specialists next year.

Mrs Eunice Tay and Mr Alfred Tan will head to Stanford University in California, for the Executive Programme for Non-Profit Leaders (EPNL), a 13 - day intensive schedule, which will help professionals to improve their ability to address key organisational and strategic challenges, as well as evaluate the rigour and relevance of new management ideas and concepts.

Mr James Wong will go to Columbia University in New York, for the Leadership Development Programme (LDP), over five days, to help non-profit leaders to learn to maximise the impact and influence of their leadership and bring about positive change for their organisations and constituents.

“I feel like a new kid on the block in the VWO (Volunteer Welfare Organisation) sector and hope to use the Stanford attachment to understand the diversity of organisational effectiveness. It’s a magnificent opportunity to broaden my perspective to international concepts in welfare management,”



said Mrs Tay, a lawyer by training, who is the Chief Executive Officer of the National Kidney Foundation.

Mr Tan's vision is to "make Singapore's social-service sector stronger" in the field of NGOs (Non-Government Organisations).

"I want to further hone my overall organisational skills, mixing with the international leaders from the non-profit sector and to garner more world-class experience in strategic planning," said Mr Tan, the Executive Director of Singapore Children's Society.

With 30 years commercial-sector experience, Mr Wong, now the Executive Director of Spastic Children's Association of Singapore, said: "It's a very meaningful profession to help the less fortunate. We need to raise governance standards in the social-service arena to world-class levels and the Tote Board must be commended for playing their role through educational professionalisation."

The Tote Board scholarship is open to all leaders of Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs) and Nonprofit Organisations (NPOs), with strong preference given to Chief Executive Officers and Executive Directors, in the social service sector.

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