

Speech By Justice Andrew Phang On the Occasion of The SMUAA Honorary Award Presentation Ceremony

Thank you very much for the great honour which you have bestowed upon me this evening. The pioneering years at SMU were not easy ones. They were uncertain times. But they were also very exciting ones. It is not often that one has the opportunity to participate in the birth of a new university. I count it a privilege to have shared that opportunity with many of you.

This award is especially significant because it comes from those whom it was my great privilege to have served in some small way.

Whilst scholarship is an important part of a lecturer's mission in a university, a much more meaningful part of that mission, in my view, is impacting the lives of the students he or she teaches. Articles and books have a shelf life, assuming that they are practical to begin with. *Relationships* last much longer. If, indeed, a lecturer has been successful in imparting the correct values to his or her students, those values will be passed on to successive generations as well. This is a true legacy because it is a *living* one.

That having been said, I cannot pretend to have achieved much. However, whatever little I have achieved, I truly treasure. In this regard, I would like to share with you part of a speech delivered earlier this year to lawyers who had been freshly called to the Bar. Although these observations were delivered in a legal context, I believe that they apply more generally as well. I hope that you do not mind me quoting an extended part of that portion of the speech, not only to provide you with the context in which I made those observations, but also because I hope that you will all impact the lives of others in some small way as well:

As I pursued excellence in my ... career, I was reminded (on more than one occasion) of a very sobering (and, in many ways, a heart-rending yet inspiring) story. It is the story of a pre-university classmate. He was then still relatively young and had his whole life ahead of him. He was a young working professional and was doing voluntary work in the United States at the time. He went to the rescue of a young girl who had been swept up by strong currents in a river and who was being carried towards a large whirlpool. This entailed struggling against the currents to get to her. The girl managed to escape and get back to shore but, sadly, my friend did not make it. In the space of just a few moments, he achieved, in my view, through his heroic act, what many of us (myself included) will not be able to achieve in a lifetime.

I am not saying that all of us have to undergo such an ultimate sacrifice in order to find meaning in our lives. Not in the least. But what I am saying is that we need, in the pursuit of our careers, to look beyond ourselves and to locate (within our respective spheres) that element of sacrifice which brings both [benefits] to those whom we serve as well as encouragement to those with whom we serve. Significantly, achieving this will, in fact, require us to pursue excellence in our careers. Such excellence will also earn you a salary – for some of you, rather large salaries. Indeed, some of you are destined to become leaders of your respective professions. Ultimately, however, at the end of your career, the greatest satisfaction will come from a life well lived for others. At the end of it all, you need to ask

yourself whether your career has *impacted the lives of other people in a positive way*. In this regard, your *attitude* on a day-to-day basis is all-important. Conscious and significant acts that directly assist clients as well as others are, of course, highly commendable. But let us not forget that little acts of kindness may also go a long way. If you make the doing of such acts a natural and integral part of your lives, you will, in fact, achieve much without stress or self-consciousness.

I spent almost a quarter of a century in legal academia before I joined the Bench. During those years, I had taught literally thousands of students and had written many books and articles. But when it came time to leave, the only meaningful – and lasting – reminders of my stint in the university could be found in a small box. It was a box of cards and letters received from students over the decades. Not many, to be sure, given my many years as a lecturer. Many of those cards and letters were, in fact, from those who were by no means the strongest students. I found, however, that little acts of kindness (which I must confess did not mean much to me at the time) often meant a lot to them. I take no pride in relating this. On the contrary, it is humbling – because it is a stark reminder that it is in the so-called small things that we do that our greatest (and most lasting) achievements are often (and unbeknownst to us) to be found.

I now have the privilege and honour of adding to that small (and precious) collection this evening.

Thank you.