

OFFICIAL RENAMING OF THE YONG PUNG HOW SCHOOL OF LAW

Thursday, 8 April 2021

The Honourable the Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon
Supreme Court of Singapore

Mrs Yong Wei-Woo and Ms Yong Ying-I, family members of the late Chief Justice Yong,

Mr Ho Kwon Ping, Chairman of the SMU Board of Trustees,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

1. A very good evening to you. It is especially pleasing to be present with you today, more than a year after the pandemic started and physical interactions were significantly curtailed. While we have mostly adjusted to virtual gatherings, there is something about human proximity and touch that just cannot be matched by the virtual encounter, and so it really is special that we are able to be together in this place with good friends, most of whom we have not actually seen for quite some time. It is especially apt that we do so to honour a man who thrived on human interactions and whose legacy is evidenced in the numerous lives he helped shape and change by these interactions.

2. We come together today to mark the official renaming of the SMU School of Law as the Yong Pung How School of Law. This, in fact, is to the great honour of the School because Chief Justice Yong Pung How's impact on our legal profession can only be described as profound and immense. Many in this audience lived through the years when the Chief Justice led tirelessly from the front and, with incredible determination, fundamentally transformed and modernised the administration of justice in Singapore. This was foundational to the system of justice that we are privileged to call ours today, and it is an

achievement that is still talked about around the world today, more than three decades after the Chief embarked on it. I can illustrate this with a brief story: I was recently invited to deliver a keynote speech to the judiciary of Jamaica to mark a major milestone in their judicial reform journey and both in the discussion I had with their Chief Justice before the event as well as in my speech, the work of Chief Justice Yong was the subject of much attention. In the short span of a few years, he revamped our court processes and implemented a slew of measures that together were effective in eliminating a backlog at that time of more than 2000 cases in the Supreme Court alone. As a result, cases that would have taken years to be heard when he started, were being cleared in months by the time he finished. The Chief was blessed with incredible clarity of vision as to what needed to be done, and the gumption to go on and get it done, and it is with this rare combination that he achieved his vision of a world-class Judiciary in the last and most notable of his several illustrious careers.

3. But I want to return to a point I started with, which is the impact that he had on people. The Chief had a very strong nurturing instinct which led him to take a particular interest in the training and education of young lawyers and students. In his time as the President of the Legal Service Commission, he initiated the Justices' Law Clerk scheme to enlist talented young officers into the Legal Service. This went well beyond a recruitment exercise, as he took a genuine interest in the lives of these young lawyers. He listened to them, kept an eye on how they were doing, counselled them in their careers, and mentored them through the pains and challenges of growing up. He cared deeply for these young colleagues and sought to help them grow into the best persons they could be. More than two decades later, several of them were among his most regular visitors in hospital during his last illness. They sat with him, held his hand, remembered his many stories, reflected on what he had taught them about life, and sang some of his favourite songs to cheer him up. And I am fortunate indeed to have several of them serve as my colleagues on the Bench today.

4. This is all part of what makes this renaming so very appropriate. But it goes beyond that of course, because the Chief also had a particular connection with this law school. Upon its establishment in 2007, around a year after he stepped down from the Bench, Chief Justice Yong took on the role of steering the Advisory Board as its Founding Chairman, and in that capacity he facilitated and nurtured close relationships between the school, the Judiciary, and the profession. I served as a member of that Board at that time, and recall being astounded by the Chief's energy and dedication to ensuring that the new school started on a solid footing with a good network of people who wished it well, and a practical presence with our Judges and lawyers. He later established the Yong Pung How Professorship of Law in 2007 so that the school would have the funds and more importantly, the clout to attract top legal academics in the world to teach and research here. He also identified various areas of commercial law that he thought should serve as the strategic focus for the law school and that would be aligned with the nation's own development. These initiatives turned out to be prescient, and have laid the strongest possible foundation for the law school which has gone on to establish an outstanding pedigree that well exceeds what one might have expected from an institution that has been around for just a decade and a half. The Chief was also very committed to doing what he could to ensure that nobody who wanted to pursue higher education would be prevented from doing so because of a lack of funds. He established the Yong Pung How Bursary in Law in 2013 to provide financial aid for less privileged students and in 2016 expanded this into a university-wide scheme. To date, more than 80 bursaries have been awarded to deserving students. I have no doubt that those who have benefitted from his kindness will find it in themselves to pay this debt of gratitude forward one day.

5. Looking back on a man who had a considerable influence on me personally, I think the Chief may have always had a natural inclination to

encourage the education and training of young lawyers and to mentor them because it cohered with two particular aspects of his personality and beliefs. First, he had a clear vision about the importance of educating and training the next generation of lawyers whom he saw as instrumental to supporting the nation's development. Second, and because of his strong nurturing instinct, he knew that these young people who were our future, would benefit the most from the guidance and mentorship of those who were older and perhaps a little wiser, and he was determined to do all he could to help them on their way.

6. We in Singapore do not often name places after people. Certainly, Chief Justice Yong would have seen his lifetime of service to our nation in a variety of capacities as a privilege and a responsibility. But occasionally, we make an exception – and in the context of our profession, it is difficult to think of a better case for doing so than for Chief Justice Yong. The school must now face the challenge of living up to the memory of the illustrious man after whom it is honoured to be named. I know that Dean Goh and his colleagues will work extremely hard to build on the Chief's legacy and vision for a Singapore law school of the highest quality: one that is bold and innovative, that is internationally recognised as a centre of excellence but that nonetheless strives to remain relevant to the needs of our profession and society, and that keeps the welfare of its students at the heart of everything it does. Undoubtedly, the school has the best possible inspiration for achieving this worthwhile mission in its most distinguished protonym!

7. Once again, it is good to see all of you. Thank you very much and keep well.