

Appreciation Dinner for Mr S R Nathan on Friday, 28 October 2011

Your Excellency Mr S R Nathan, Singapore's 6th President

Mr Heng Swee Keat, Minister for Education

NUS Pro-Chancellors

Mr Wong Ngit Liong, Chairman, NUS Board of Trustees

NUS Trustees

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

I remember vividly my first week as an NUS medical student, and in particular what Professor Khoo Oon Teik said then at the Master's Welcome Tea at the King Edward VII Hall at Sepoy Lines. After words of congratulation on our doing well thus far, Prof Khoo reminded us that we should always be humble, as many, much more exceptional individuals had come before us.

This has indeed proved to be true.

During the course of my subsequent, long association with our University, I have met people who are frighteningly smart, wondered at how unfair it is that some individuals are so multi-talented, and have been inspired by others who have pursued their passion with conviction and impact.

Tonight, as the NUS community gathers to express our deep gratitude and thanks to our immediate past Chancellor, Mr SR Nathan, we are also honouring and celebrating an individual who has further extended the meaning of true exceptionalism.

The first time I met then President Nathan, was at an Academy of Medicine event in 2003. I had thanked him for his strong support and will always remember his response. He leant forward, put his hand on mine, and said simply but sincerely, this is something I really feel I should do.

This genuine warmth, and ability to put others at ease, is perhaps Mr Nathan's most notable and appreciated quality. It springs from his sincere interest in people - their hopes, dreams, concerns and fears – as well as his deep sense of humanism.

I had a glimpse of this when I had the honour of a long car-ride together with the President 3 years ago. He spoke at length and with great knowledge of his friends and people he had met, from his childhood to the present. I was truly amazed by this, as someone who has difficulty remembering what had happened even the day before. My conclusion though was a simple one – Mr Nathan really cares about other people.

At NUS, we feel really privileged that as our Chancellor, Mr Nathan also cared deeply about our community and our institution. He was truly generous with his time, wise counsel and energy. Through his many initiatives and actions, he touched the lives of

countless students, faculty, staff and alumni and was a source of inspiration for many. For this, we are indeed grateful.

Recently, I had the opportunity to read Mr Nathan's memoirs and my admiration for him grew even further.

I had of course been aware of Mr Nathan's many and distinguished achievements and contributions in a wide range of areas, his deep sense of duty and his great personal courage as epitomized by the key role he played in the Laju hijacking affair.

But reading about his childhood in his recent memoirs provided a completely different context to these achievements. As a boy, he dropped out of school not once but twice, and even ran away from home. He faced adversities that would have crushed many people. Yet, somehow, he prevailed – not only did he prevail, he excelled.

Such resourcefulness and resilience despite extreme challenges, is a rare quality. For the NUS community, it is also a source of great pride. We feel proud that our Chancellor stands out thus, as a real-life example of the power of the human spirit, of the ability to succeed despite the odds, and of the will to keep a deep sense of humility throughout.

One other thing struck me while reviewing the memoirs. I was really delighted to read about how Mr Nathan had gained entry into our university and how much this had helped him in his later life. It reminds us of the power of the education we provide, to transform the lives of individuals, and through them, to impact the lives of many others and of society at large. Mr Nathan, my colleagues and I will take this lesson to heart – we will work even harder to ensure that NUS will continue to strive to transform our students, for the good of our community and the advancement of society. I should also own up that I was delighted to read this part of your memoirs because it allows us to proudly claim you as our distinguished alumnus.

Besides Mr Nathan, we are also very grateful to Mrs Nathan for her strong and gracious support of our university. While Mrs Nathan is not able to join us this evening, we would like to thank her for her genuine interest in the work of our university and for the example of her quiet kindness and humility. It is clear that Mrs Nathan's unwavering support has been vital to Mr Nathan's success and we deeply appreciate her selflessness in sharing him with us.

In closing, I would like, on behalf of NUS, to once again express our deep gratitude and thanks to Mr and Mrs Nathan. Your Excellency, you have left an enduring and indelible impact on our entire university community, just as you have done for our country, Singaporean society and far beyond. We very much hope we will have the honour and benefit of your continued close association with our university. May we wish you good health, fulfillment and joy for many, many, more years to come. Thank you.