

Commencement Dinner 2014
NUS President Professor Tan Chorh Chuan
18 Jul 2014
On Being Optimistic

NUS Chancellor, President Tony Tan Keng Yam, and Mrs Mary Tan
NUS Pro-Chancellors
Chairman, NUS Board of Trustees, Mr Wong Ngit Liong and Mrs Wong
Members of the NUS Board of Trustees
Distinguished Guests
Graduates, Alumni, Colleagues
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good evening!

First, I would like to thank Yi Da, President of the NUSSU Ex-co, for his kind words about the leadership of NUS. But when you speak of the leadership of the University, we should also acknowledge the leadership of the student body and it's been a tremendous pleasure and honour to work with you and your colleagues in advancing the cause of the University. I should also mention that the leadership also extends to our alumni and that we are very delighted to have so many leaders of our alumni here with us this evening.

The past two weeks have zipped by in a happy blur.

Ten thousand plus degree scrolls were handed out, a corresponding number of hands vigorously shaken, and we witnessed the rise of the Commencement "selfie snappers".



All too soon, the celebrations are drawing to a close, for tonight's dinner marks the finale of Commencement 2014.

You would have noticed that, in the spirit of experimentation, we are in a new venue for Commencement dinner this year. If you think the seating is a bit odd, just make believe that you are Harry Potter feasting at the Hogwart's dining hall. Those of you who are avid Harry Potter fans would point out instantly that the Hogwart's dining hall is supposed to have "thousands of candles floating in mid-air over long tables... laid with glittering golden plates and goblets".

I do apologise that we are not able to supply golden plates. This is because the only wizards we have at NUS are the academic and research kind. To the disappointment of Ajith Prasad and his colleagues at our Office of Resource Planning, our sort of wizards aren't able to conjure up more operating budget.

In my Commencement speech two weeks ago, I spoke on the topic of "being happy".

This evening, to show that even university Presidents can be consistent, I would like to speak on a related theme, that is: "On being optimistic"

One of the most optimistic people I know is my wife Evelyn.

Evelyn and I like walking in the mountains. Periodically during our treks, we will encounter some terribly daunting ascent at the end of a hard day of walking. Most of us would be groaning, and the men especially would be groaning quietly. When this happens, Evelyn's general response is often: "Great! The view would be terrific higher up!"



Some years ago, when we were walking in India, we realised too late that it was a purely vegetarian trek. That meant ten days of camping with chapattis in the morning; chapattis and dhal for lunch; and chapattis, chick peas, dhal and vegetable curry for dinner.



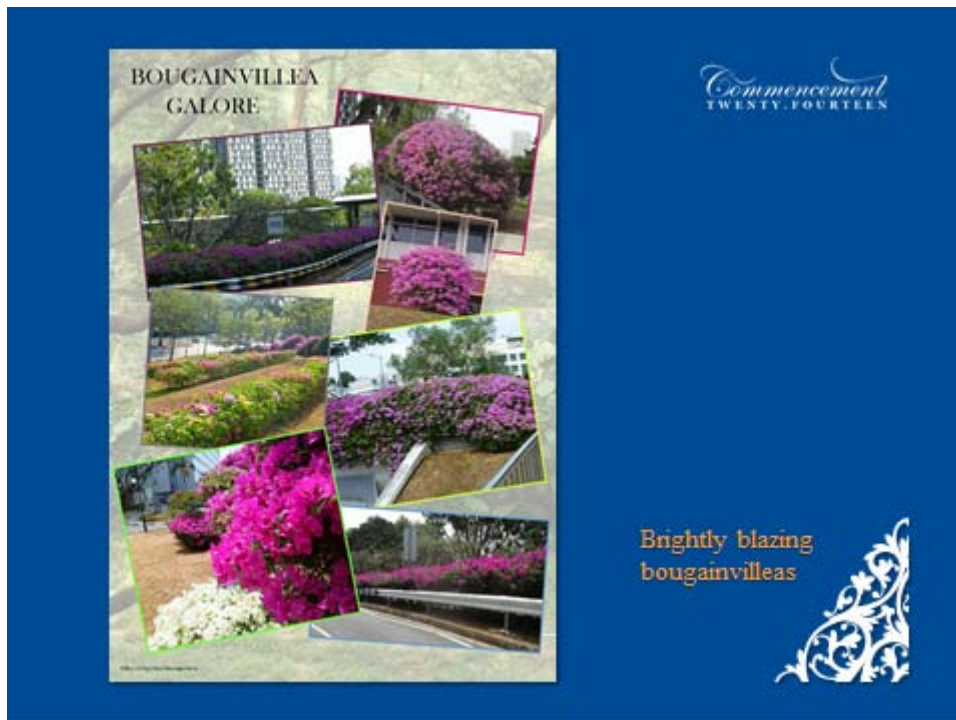
While the rest of us would sit around the camp-fire after dinner, feeling somewhat sorry for ourselves and having food hallucinations, Evelyn's contribution would be "Hey, for breakfast tomorrow, I bet the chapattis would be great with peanut butter!"

So I can speak with some experience when I say that it is wonderful to be around optimistic people, and even better, to be optimistic yourself.

The good news is that optimism is alive and growing at NUS, and there are many reasons for us to be even more optimistic about our university's future.

Let me share three little stories to illustrate.

First, most of you would remember the prolonged dry spell we suffered in February this year. The grass shrivelled and died and our lawns were all brown. In the midst of all this, I received an email from Vice President of Campus Infrastructure, Yong Kwet Yew with photos of the bougainvilleas on campus. Because his colleagues at UCI had been diligently cultivating the plants, the unusually dry weather had triggered profuse flowering. So, amidst the parched brown grounds on campus, we had a sea of brightly blazing coloured plants.



The photos which Kwet Yew shared were part of an e-newsletter highlighting UCI's efforts to bring more colours and buzz to our campus landscape. This may seem like a small thing, but I thought it reflected a sense of pride in our campus and a strong commitment to work towards its continual improvement.

I am happy that in meeting with colleagues and friends at events and functions, in observing their constant search to do things even better, I often discern this same passion and dedication.

A good case in point is the Commencement celebrations and dinner this year. For our colleagues in the Registrar's Office and Office of Corporate Relations in particular, it has been a gruelling several weeks. I think you would agree with me that they have done a terrific job – can I ask them to stand or wave so that we can recognise them tonight!



Second, the endeavours, contributions and achievements of our students give great cause for optimism.

I could point to many examples to illustrate this, but this evening, I would like to celebrate the “can do” and entrepreneurial dimension of our students. Some of their innovations have been commercially successful, while others are addressing real and important health and social needs. But what is perhaps more important, is that our students are looking at the needs, challenges and opportunities in the world around them and applying themselves, with passion and boldness, to devising new solutions and innovations.

For example, Eason Chow, a student in our Industrial Design programme, worked as a volunteer at the Muscular Dystrophy Association of Singapore. He noticed that bed-bound patients had to be turned regularly to prevent bed sores and lung problems. This was hard for the caregivers especially when turning needs to be done during the night. He therefore invented Flipod which is a simple assistive device using two air-bags which can be activated to help turn the patient.



Another example is Zopim. Its four co-founders - Royston Tay, Wu Wenxiang, Kwok Yangbin and Julian Low – were at the NUS Overseas College Program in Silicon Valley and founded Zopim in 2008.



They wanted to change the way businesses communicate with their customers online. Incubated by NUS Enterprise, the team overcame many challenges and grew

the business to become one of the most well-used support chat widgets around the world. This year, Zopim was acquired for about US\$30 m by Zendesk, a San Francisco-based company. With this, Zopim joins five other start-ups by NUS Overseas College alumni that have been acquired. We are indeed proud of their achievement.

Third, I am happy with the large and growing number of initiatives on campus that are making our NUS community an even more compassionate, kind and inclusive one. Some are simple but important acts of appreciation and recognition.

The NUS Students' Union recently treated our security guards, canteen staff and cleaners to a picnic with student performances and gifts. Students from the Yale-NUS College, the College of Alice and Peter Tan and several others have been doing the same for our support staff colleagues, migrant workers and disadvantaged groups in the wider community.



Last month, NUS students and graduates took part in Mount Elizabeth Hospital's Run for Cover Challenge to raise funds for cataract operations. The teams clocked a

total of over 3500 km on treadmills for 24 hours non-stop which yielded 117 free eye operations for the elderly.



Challenge winners – DTCC team comprising NUS alumni and students

I could relate many more examples, big and small, but all very worthy. But my main point is a simple one.

In a globalised world where the hot pursuit of individual success can make us indifferent to the plight of others; where differences between groups can fuel intolerance and polarize communities; it is crucial for us to continue building a campus culture which upholds rigorous debate but also civility and respect of others; an inclusive campus norm that values service to society and which is compassionate, kind and uplifting - an environment that promotes optimism and hope for the future.

To the class of 2014, as you graduate from our campus, I hope you will carry with you this optimism about the future, and to bring a positive attitude and energy to your work, to your lives and to the lives of those around you. My colleagues and I wish you the very best as you move forward to discover, grow, contribute, serve and find fulfillment.

My heartiest congratulations, and I wish you a most wonderful evening! Thank you.

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