



Media Release

**SMU Pro Bono Centre recognises volunteer lawyers and students
at its annual appreciation dinner**

Singapore, 20 November 2019 (Wednesday) – SMU Pro Bono Centre today lauded the dedication and contribution of several individuals for their pro bono efforts. Mr Richard Tan Ming Kirk was recognised as the volunteer lawyer who has participated the most number of times at the SMU Pro Bono Centre Legal Clinic in 2019 as well as having served continuously for more than five years as a volunteer lawyer at the Centre’s Legal Clinic. Furthermore, SMU Juris Doctor graduate Mr Tan Wei Chieh and SMU LLB graduate Ms Susanna Abigail Yim, both from the Class of 2019, were recognised for having contributed the most number of approved pro bono hours, 104.5 hours and 139.8 hours respectively, to be precise.

The awards were presented at the SMU Pro Bono Centre Appreciation Dinner which was graced by Mr Edwin Tong, SC, Senior Minister of State, Ministry of Law and Ministry of Health. Held at the SMU School of Law, the event serves to thank lawyers and individuals, as well as agencies that offer a wide range of pro bono placement opportunities to SMU students.

In addition to the special awards, certificates of appreciation were also presented to graduates from the Class of 2019 and volunteer lawyers. 14 JD graduates and 30 LLB graduates who completed *all* of their university community service requirement (50 hours and 80 hours respectively) in approved pro bono work were recognised for their commitment. In addition, 25 volunteer lawyers, 18 of whom are SMU Law alumni, also received certificates of appreciation for participating in the Centre’s legal clinic in 2019.

Professor of Law Chan Wing Cheong, who is also Director of the SMU Pro Bono Centre, said, “We have much to celebrate at the SMU Pro Bono Centre. Since the start of our first free legal clinic in September 2013, we have grown in many fronts – be it the number of volunteering lawyers, volunteering students or applicants whom we see. Six years on, I am delighted and humbled that we continue to make an impact in facilitating justice for those who may not know where or who else to turn to.”

“Our work would not have been possible without the tremendous support of many individuals and organisations. Community service is integral to the SMU ethos and is in every student’s DNA even before pro bono became compulsory for law students in Singapore; we have to thank everyone for partnering with us in giving our young law students a holistic education that will enable them to make a meaningful impact in society when they enter the profession. I also wish to express our gratitude to RHT Rajan Menon Foundation, for their generous gift of \$300,000 that supports us for five years from Academic Year 2017/2018,” he added.

The SMU Pro Bono Centre started the free legal clinic in 2013. The legal clinic has grown from a fortnightly service to a weekly service since 2017. In 2018, the clinics saw a total of 287 applicants, 70.7% of whom are Singaporeans, and 46.7% earned less than \$4,000 per month.

The Pro Bono Centre's survey found that more than 8 in 10 applicants were 'very satisfied' or 'quite satisfied' with the service they received, and more than 9 in 10 indicated that they will return to the clinic if they have new legal issues and will also recommend the legal clinic to others. Most applicants found out about the legal clinic through online resource (40.7%), family members (16.7%) and the Law Society Pro Bono Services (12.4%). In 2018, the most common issues presented to the legal clinic comprised family issues (22.6%), employment issues (12.5%), criminal matters (10.5%) and tenancy issues (7.7%).

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Enclosures:

- Annex 1: Profiles of award recipients
 - Annex 2: Fact sheet – Community service and pro bono contribution by SMU law students
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About Singapore Management University

A premier university in Asia, the Singapore Management University (SMU) is internationally recognised for its world-class research and distinguished teaching. Established in 2000, SMU's mission is to generate leading-edge research with global impact and to produce broad-based, creative and entrepreneurial leaders for the knowledge-based economy. SMU's education is known for its highly interactive, collaborative and project-based approach to learning

Home to over 10,000 students across undergraduate, postgraduate professional and post-graduate research programmes, SMU, is comprised of six schools: School of Accountancy, Lee Kong Chian School of Business, School of Economics, School of Information Systems, School of Law, and School of Social Sciences. SMU offers a wide range of bachelors', masters' and PhD degree programmes in the disciplinary areas associated with the six schools, as well as in multidisciplinary combinations of these areas.

SMU emphasises rigorous, high-impact, multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary research that addresses Asian issues of global relevance. SMU faculty members collaborate with leading international researchers and universities around the world, as well as with partners in the business community and public sector. SMU's city campus is a modern facility located in the heart of downtown Singapore, fostering strategic linkages with business, government and the wider community. www.smu.edu.sg

About SMU School of Law

SMU School of Law proudly welcomed its first cohort of 116 students in August 2007. Taught by a dynamic faculty with postgraduate degrees from renowned universities, the School aims to nurture its students to become excellent lawyers who will contribute significantly to society. Trained with the ability to contextualise legal expertise and to think across disciplines and geographical borders coupled with SMU's interactive pedagogy, SMU's law graduates are confident articulate and analytically agile.

The SMU School of Law offers a four-year full-time Bachelor of Laws programme, a five-year double-degree programme which combines law with Accountancy, Business, Economics, Information Systems or Social Sciences, a three-year Juris Doctor programme, a Master of Laws programme, as well as continuing legal education. The School has also set up four legal research centres focusing on A.I. and data governance, cross-border commercial law, international dispute resolution and intellectual property. www.law.smu.edu.sg

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Annex 1

Profiles of award recipients

Name: MR RICHARD TAN MING KIRK

Award: Volunteer lawyer who has participated the most number of times in the Legal Clinic in 2019; and served five years at the SMU Pro Bono Centre Legal Clinic

- **Career background** - Mr Tan was admitted as a Singapore advocate and solicitor in 1985 and has practised law full-time or part-time for most of the years since then. His areas of practice changed over time and included litigation, property, banking & finance and general corporate work. Presently, he is involved mainly in corporate real estate work and also sits as a strata titles board member to mediate and arbitrate cases brought before the board.
- **On how he started volunteering in pro bono work** - “Like many things, it was due to a combination of factors including trying to be a good person and wanting to lead a more meaningful life. I have been a volunteer in other organisations since my school days and started volunteering at the Law Society's legal clinics about a decade ago when I realised there was a demand for lawyers to provide pro bono services that didn't appear to be met. When SMU was looking for lawyers to help start its legal clinic about five years ago, I volunteered at SMU as well.”
- **Other community service commitments** - Other than volunteering at SMU's legal clinic (2 or 3 nights a month), he is vice-chair of the Project Law Help Committee of Law Society Pro Bono Services. The committee is involved mainly in legal assistance for charities and other community organisations.

Outside of the Law Society, he is president of the Singapore Life Saving Society – a charity promoting lifesaving, lifeguarding and water safety in Singapore (He qualified to work as a lifeguard many years before he qualified to work as a lawyer) – and also sit on the board of directors of the International Life Saving Federation, the international organisation leading the global effort in preventing drowning and injury around water and setting the international standards for lifeguards.

- **On how he juggles his time** - “Naturally, some financial and other sacrifices have to be made. To enable me to spend more time on my volunteering and other activities, I have an arrangement with my law firm that is flexible and does not require me to work full-time. On the whole, my volunteering activities have been worthwhile and that is probably why I continue with them.”
- **Thoughts on volunteering** - “While it doesn't really matter what good cause one volunteers for, as part of the fortunate minority who have benefited from a legal education, it is good to do something to help those who may not be able to pay for legal assistance.”

Name: MR TAN WEI CHIEH

Award: Winner of Spirit of Pro Bono Award (JD). He clocked the most number of approved pro bono hours (104.5 hours) among the graduating JD cohort in 2019

- **Academic / career background** - Mr Tan left his ‘iron rice bowl’ job at the Ministry of Defence to pursue law (Juris Doctor programme) at SMU as he felt that the rule of law is vital as a foundation upon which nations are built, especially for a small nation like Singapore. “I also

wanted to be part of this sacred mission - as a catholic, I strongly believe in using law to serve the cause of justice and the public good.”

- **On how he started volunteering in pro bono work** - “I always believe that with community service, our quality of life will be enhanced. By giving back what we have received, we ourselves grow and develop into better persons. I am also inspired and encouraged by my mentor and godmother, Mrs Alice Tan, who as a lawyer devoted herself tirelessly helping the less privileged in the community.”
- **Other community service commitments** - Other than participating at SMU’s legal clinic, he also teaches tuition at his RC to the less privileged students, and volunteers at his church every week.
- **On how he juggles his time** - “I strongly believe in work-life balance, be it studying or working. By setting goals and prioritising your tasks wisely, a lot of things can be achieved in 24 hours.... I can’t wait to increase my pro bono contribution qualitatively and quantitatively when I am called to the Bar next year.”
- **Sharing a pro bono experience that left a deep impression** - “I remember there was a downtrodden lady who wanted to divorce her husband who had abused her physically. During the short 20 minutes of pro bono legal advice, there was an immediate change of mood after she became aware of her legal rights. That episode left a deep impression in me as it showed the effect of legal rights empowerment.”
- **Thoughts on volunteering** - “Every little effort of serving and giving back to the community will make it a better place to live in, like what the Latin phrase *pro bono publico* signifies ‘for the good of the people’”.

Name: MS SUSANNA ABIGAIL YIM

Award: Winner of Spirit of Pro Bono Award (LLB). She clocked the most number of approved pro bono hours (139.8 hours) among her graduating LLB cohort

- **Academic background** - Ms Yim graduated from the SMU Bachelor of Law’s programme in 2019. For most of her formal education, she was more inclined towards the sciences but became more interested in the arts and language subjects during her time in Junior College. Eventually, she took up law at her father’s suggestion, and chose SMU because she was attracted to the possibility of taking a second major in Global Asia as well as the university’s good location. While in SMU, she was involved in the SMU Red Cross as she wanted to help out with blood donation drives and to learn first aid.
- **On how she started volunteering in pro bono work** - “Initially, I spent time on pro bono because it was a graduation requirement, however over time, I found it to be an effective use of time because it allowed me to see what I learnt in school be put into practice by the volunteer lawyers and I could also help people with perplexing issues in small little ways even though I was only a student. Helping out at pro bono sessions allowed me to be a small cog in the grander machinery to increase access to justice.”
- **Other community service commitments** - While in SMU, she volunteered with the SMU Red Cross on several community service projects involving senior citizens and assisted with first aid duty for SMU and for the Singapore Red Cross.

- **On how she juggles her time** - “Many schedules, to-do lists and a calendar to keep track of all my commitments.”
- **Sharing a pro bono experience that left a deep impression** - “During one clinic, there was a gentleman who was a walk-in and had a contractual dispute with his car dealership. He was very concerned and hoped to seek some advice as soon as possible. His situation seemed rather dire because the second-hand car he had purchased in hopes of making his life and his family members' lives easier turned out to be causing far more anxiety and distress instead because he was being forced to fork out huge sums of money to deal with car repairs and at the end of the day he wasn't even able to use the car.

After hearing about his situation, I asked the volunteer lawyers that day whether they would be able to provide some suggestions to him on such short notice. Luckily, there was a volunteer lawyer who was very happy to help, particularly because he had recently dealt with a similar matter at work. The incident illustrated two key points: first, that legal issues can very easily cause someone's quality of life to deteriorate significantly, essentially causing their life to reach a stand-still until the issue is resolved. Second, having had the privilege of reading the law and practising it, lawyers can just as easily help to turn the situation around.”

- **Thoughts on volunteering** - “Remember that it is a privilege to read law and the legal profession is a noble one.”

Annex 2

Fact sheet – Community service and pro bono contribution by SMU law students

Since SMU's establishment in 2000, all students must participate in community service as a graduation requirement. This means that for students of SMU School of Law, contributing to the legal community and volunteerism is an integral part of their legal education well before it became mandatory in Singapore (all law students are required from 2013 by the Singapore Institute of Legal Education to complete at least 20 approved pro bono hours before graduation).

SMU requires all Bachelor of Laws (LLB) students to fulfil 80 hours of community service hours before graduation, 20 of the 80 hours must be in approved pro bono work. For Juris Doctor (JD) students, the university requirement is 50 hours of community service, and 20 of the 50 hours must be in approved pro bono work.

It is therefore noteworthy to highlight that one quarter of the law school's Class of 2019 not only completed all of their community service hours in approved pro bono but in fact exceeded the requirements.

Furthermore, while only 20 hours of approved pro bono was required of them, the cohort completed an average of 45 approved pro bono hours each. This is a remarkable achievement considering the many competing demands on the time of law students.
