

**Welcome Speech by AssocProf Rathna N. Koman at the official launch  
of the SMU Pro Bono Centre on Friday, 6 October 2017**

Good afternoon,

Mr Chan Sek Keong, former chief Justice and current Senior Judge of the Supreme court and advisor to SMU Pro Bono Centre.

Prof Lily Kong, SMU Provost

Mr Tan Chong Huat, Chairman of the RHT Rajan Menon Foundation and Senior Partner, RHTLaw Taylor Wessing LLP.

Patron & Directors of RHT Rajan Menon Foundation;

Mr VK Rajah, Chairman of the SMU School of Law Advisory Board

Members of the SMU School of Law Advisory Board

Partners of RHTLaw Taylor Wessing and Leaders of the RHT Group of Companies;

Distinguished guests, colleagues, SMU students and members of the media.

First and foremost our sincere gratitude to RHT Rajan Menon Foundation for their generous gift towards our pro bono centre.

It is a momentous occasion for us and this starts our next leg of our journey. In moments like these it is always good to reflect and take stock of what has been done so far and what else can be done and to be most grateful to all who have been instrumental in getting us to where we are today.

SMU is not new to the pro bono scene. When the law school started in 2007, we also laid the foundation for a strong commitment to pro bono work.

By 2008, our students were already actively participating in pro bono work organized and managed by the Law Society of Singapore and were participating as student assistants in free legal clinics nationwide.

By 2009/10, based on university statistics our students were already doing an average of 22 hours of pro bono work in addition to their community service requirement.

5 years since the inception of the law school, given the strong pro bono culture at SMU, we decided to run our own free legal clinics in 2013. The clinics were run at SMU admin building, level 6, premises of the Financial Training Institute, who had so graciously offered their premises for this good cause. Hence the offices used for meetings and training of bankers and others during the day transformed into a legal clinic on Fridays to serve indigents.

The clinics were supported by 192 student volunteers of which 4-6 were student leaders trained to lead and manage the clinic.

We trained students in leadership and legal clinical soft skills to lead and run the clinics and assist volunteer lawyers.

Additionally we hoped that such training would inspire confidence and increase comfort level of students in doing legal clinics so that they would become the source of volunteer lawyers for legal clinics when they become practitioners.

We wanted to create an informed student base that takes ownership in serving humanity.

Hence that brings us to where we are today:-

1. We have 554 student volunteers of which no less than 30 are student leaders, serving at our Centre.
2. We now have our alumni serving at our clinics along with other volunteer lawyers. In particular, Alvin Ong Chee Keong, a 2011 graduate an associate with Resource Law, takes time to train our students in clinical legal skills even after clinic hours.
3. Now with our premises, since 2017 Feb, we additionally run hotline and a helpdesk facility on a daily basis during weekdays to take instructions from indigents. Our students, trained in client interviewing, man these counters.
4. We offer summer internships to our students.
5. We collaborate at regional level with our South East Asian university partners:-

- a. By offering internships during the year.
  - b. By exchanging and advocating best practices in pro bono,
  - c. By sharing materials and MO for running legal clinics with our partner universities.
6. Last but not least, SMU students that graduated this summer was the batch that was subject of the minimum 20 hour mandatory pro bono graduating requirement. I am pleased to say that this batch of students including JDs, served a total of 6833.82 pro bono hours. This works out on average to 37 pro bono hours per student. This is in addition to whatever community service they do as a student.

For the next 5 years, and hopefully thereafter, we consider it our privilege to partner the RHT Rajan Menon foundation which has a strong commitment to serve humanity.

With our new partner, we look forward to:-

1. chartering new territories in pro bono work;
2. identifying and serving indigents in areas where access to justice is much needed.

Every student has it in them to serve humanity. We started with that assumption and the possibilities have been endless.

So thank you all for joining us today to celebrate this moment and our sincere gratitude to all who have made this possible.

Thank you.