

# Her resilience in and out of class pays off with scholarship

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## Her resilience in and out of class pays off with scholarship

In the years before she found the right academic fit, Miss Shira Ong found herself facing one crossroad after another.

After secondary school, she was unsure of where to study next, so she applied to a junior college. But two months in, she found it challenging to adapt to the rigour of the curriculum.

After speaking to a teacher, she appealed to transfer to a polytechnic, following in the footsteps of her elder sister to study accountancy at Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

It was not an easy decision, as she knew staying in JC would have cost significantly less, and family finances were tight.

But, she reasoned, "if I stayed in JC, I would not have been motivated... At least going to poly, with a poly diploma, I would be able to find work".

But after starting her poly studies in 2021, she realised she was not interested in accountancy and could not envision herself pursuing it as a career.

Not wanting to incur more time and costs transferring elsewhere, she decided to stay on, study hard and make it to university, where she would choose another specialisation.

"I wanted to get a really good GPA (grade point average) because my goal was to get into uni to try something different," the 22-year-old said, recalling her mindset then.

### JUGGLING DUAL ROLES

Like her sister, Miss Ong took on jobs during her school holidays so she would not have to take an allowance from her parents.

Her father is a part-time packer at a supermarket, and her mother is an administrative clerk. Their CPF covered her poly school fees through the CPF Education Loan Scheme.

In university, Miss Ong had a clearer idea of what career she wanted to pursue – sociology and political science. However, as the CPF Education Loan and a Higher Education Bursary were not enough, she had to cover about a third of her school fees herself.

The sociology and political science double major chose Singapore Management University not only for the course, but also for its central location, which made it easier for her



While juggling school and work, Miss Ong found joy in participating in SMU KIN, a student-led community service project mentoring underprivileged schoolchildren. ST PHOTO NG SOR LUAN

“

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When she enrolled in SMU, Miss Ong had to work several part-time jobs. She did not have the time to take on some CCAs and hang out with friends.

to work while studying.

Miss Ong worked multiple jobs during her first two years at SMU. These included two to three shifts a week as a retail assistant in a jewellery shop and other ad-hoc jobs that fit her schedule.

Even during a full-time internship with youth charity CARE Singapore

between her first and second year of studies, she would spend her weekends working.

In her second year of university, she also took on shifts as a receptionist in her school gym, maxing out the 16-hour cap a week that she could work in that position.

All this meant that she could not take on co-curricular activities that required more time commitment, and often had to turn down friends' invitations to hang out.

Looking back on these sacrifices, she said: "I used to be bitter about working, but when I reflect on my experiences in life, I think I would not have had it any other way."

While juggling school and work, she found joy in participating in SMU KIN, a student-led community service project mentoring underprivileged schoolchildren. "It was such an enriching experience, and I really enjoyed that."

She also kept a close eye on scholarships, applying for more than 20 but receiving many rejections.

"It's so taxing when you apply and get rejected and then apply again... But my advice is always just try," she said.

In 2025, she applied for the Lim Kim San Memorial Scholarship despite thinking it would be competitive. Out of 88 applicants in 2024, only 12 applicants were successful.

Reflecting on the interview process, Miss Ong said: "I really appreciated when the panel could see that there is value and insights from these part-time jobs or the experiences that applicants have in our lives."

Since receiving the scholarship in July 2025, she has been less stressed about her finances.

She has cut back on work and now channels her energies into more community work, such as volunteering for the urban farm initiative City Sprouts.

Miss Ong recently completed an exchange programme in the Netherlands and is working through a list of action items, such as finding more volunteering opportunities and scheduling meet-ups with friends.

She said: "It was such a great sense of relief that I had this scholarship. I'm so happy to know that the community is supporting me in fulfilling the things I want to achieve."

### THE LIM KIM SAN MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP

The SPH Foundation offers the bond-free scholarship for students pursuing full-time degree programmes in the languages, linguistics and humanities at local universities.

It covers a student's full course fees, including tuition and examination fees. It also includes a living allowance of \$2,500 and a book allowance of \$500 per year.

The scholarship was established in 2006 in honour of the late Lim Kim San, Singapore's former minister for national development, who also served as executive chairman of Singapore Press Holdings from 1988 to 2002. It has benefited close to 200 students over the past two decades.

Applications are open until April 30. For details, visit [www.sphfoundation.org.sg](http://www.sphfoundation.org.sg).

**WHAT IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN:** In the April 6 issue, the man in the photo caption on page 7 was incorrectly identified. The correct name should be Mr Dion Lim, 25, owner of DAWDLE. We are sorry for the error.