

BREAK BOUNDARIES, REWRITE PLAYBOOK: GU

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Olympic freestyle skier Eileen Gu (far right) with Singapore Management University president Lily Kong, who moderated the session at SMU on Oct 12. Gu offered insight into a range of topics at the event, which is part of the KFF Inspiring Women Leadership Series.
ST PHOTOS: KEVIN LIM



CHALLENGING NOTIONS
It's not about beating other people, but uplifting the entire community so that every single person ends up being better in the way that a rising tide raises all ships.



EILEEN GU, Winter Olympics triple-gold medallist, on healthy competition.



Eileen Gu credited her mother Gu Yan (above) as a key figure in shaping the person she is today.

She took up ballet and piano, and even tried archery at one point when her fascination with dystopian novels convinced her that it would be a good skill to have. There was also basketball, football and skiing, as well as maths and science camps. Dispelling the notion that her mother is a “tiger mum”, Gu said: “She really gave me the freedom to find out who I am and to really support me and guide me in ways that make sense, and at the same time, to grow beside me – she’s also living for the first time. “She’s a unique person who is more than just a mum.” For women seeking success in their respective fields, she offered a different way of thinking, suggesting that they challenge the traditional notions of being a “big fish in a small pond” or a “small fish in a big pond”. Instead, her personal philosophy is to “create your own pond” and “be your own fish”. Gu, who graduated from Stanford University with an international relations major in June, added: “It’s not about beating other people, but uplifting the entire community so that every single person ends up being better in the way that a rising tide raises all ships.

“So I want to think about healthy competition and, in many ways, no competition at all because there’s only one of you and only one person has the perspective and history and skill set that I mentioned earlier – and that’s you.”

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In town for SMU event, Olympic freestyle skiing champ tells audience to uplift others

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Freestyle skier Eileen Gu is best known for defying gravity on the slopes, executing spins and double corks while flying through the air. For 40 minutes on Oct 12, the triple-gold medallist in the Winter Olympics hardly moved an inch, but she managed to capture the attention of over 1,000 people in a packed auditorium at the Singapore Management University’s (SMU) Yong Pung How School

of Law. Making an appearance at the KFF Inspiring Women Leadership Series, she discussed a host of topics in the session moderated by SMU president Lily Kong. She also attended the Formula 1 Singapore Grand Prix on Oct 11. The 23-year-old spoke not just about sport, but also offered insight into training both the body and mind, and why artificial intelligence can be seen as a force for good rather than something to fear. She also shared about the importance of uplifting others, and the

profound influence her mother has had on her journey and success. Whether referencing French philosopher and mathematician Rene Descartes or engaging in more light-hearted exchanges, she carried herself with confidence and composure, balanced by a humble admission that she has much to learn as both a person and an athlete. “By definition, to progress in the sport of free skiing is to ask your body to do something that’s never been done before, ever,” said Gu as she talked about neuroplasticity, the brain’s ability to rewire and form new neural pathways through repeated thoughts and actions. “Every new trick that I learn, I’m breaking a physical, mental, emotional boundary that had been set

for me before, it’s breaking new ground every time. “Conceptually, familiarising yourself with discomfort and knowing almost every boundary is somewhat plastic, so there always is potential to expand, there always is potential to grow and change and so that just comes back to self-observation.” For Gu, who was born in the United States but represents China, self-observation begins with understanding things such as how she feels at any given moment, as well as learning to distinguish between fear, doubt and nerves. Audience members hung on to her every word on Oct 12, mobile phones at the ready, as she spoke at the event organised by the Karim Family Foundation (KFF) and the

SMU Office of Alumni Relations, with the support of Musim Mas Foundation. Among those listening with pride was her mother Gu Yan, whom the athlete credited as a key figure in shaping the person she is today. When asked how much of her excellence has been moulded by her mother, Gu broke into a wide smile and said: “My mum’s the best for sure, let’s just get that off the table, there’s no question (about that). “Everyone, tell her she looks pretty,” she added, drawing a smattering of applause from the audience. Born and raised in San Francisco by Yan, a single mother, Gu was exposed to a wide range of interests from a young age.