



## Media Release

### **Volunteer lawyers and SMU students recognised for their exemplary pro bono contribution**

Singapore, 17 December 2020 (Thursday) – Singapore Management University (SMU) [Pro Bono Centre](#) has lauded the dedication and contribution of several individuals for their pro bono efforts.

SMU Juris Doctor graduate Ms Shim Eunkyung and SMU LLB graduate Ms Ong Jia Xin Abigail, both from the Class of 2020, were recognised for having contributed the most number of approved pro bono hours in the year. Respectively, they contributed 424.5 hours and 138.8 hours in approved pro bono work, to be precise.

For the second consecutive year, volunteer lawyer Mr Richard Tan Ming Kirk stood out for having participated the most number of times this year at the SMU Pro Bono Centre Legal Clinic. The Centre also recognised the commitment of Mr Alvin Ong Chee Keong for serving more than five years as a volunteer lawyer at the Centre's Legal Clinic.

Here is a summary of the **SMU Pro Bono Centre Special Service Awards 2020**:

<u>Award</u>	<u>Recipient</u>
Spirit of Pro Bono Award – Class of 2020 (JD)	Ms Shim Eunkyung
Spirit of Pro Bono Award – Class of 2020 (LLB)	Ms Ong Jia Xin Abigail
Volunteer Lawyer (participated most times at the SMU PBC Legal Clinic)	Mr Richard Tan Ming Kirk
Volunteer Lawyer (five-year long service award)	Mr Alvin Ong Chee Keong

In addition to the special awards, the Pro Bono Centre also gave out certificates of appreciation (by mail) to 17 JD graduates and 32 LLB graduates from the Class of 2020 who completed *all* of their university community service requirement (50 hours and 80 hours respectively) in approved pro bono work; as well as to 28 volunteer lawyers (22 of whom are SMU Law alumni) in recognition of their participation at the Centre's Legal Clinic in 2020.

Furthermore, the SMU Mediation and Negotiation Club was also named winner of the inaugural RHT Rajan Menon Foundation Pro Bono Challenge for conceiving and developing the idea of a Pro Bono Mediation Clinic. The competition was organised to encourage SMU Law students to come up with ideas of projects that will help solve an unmet legal need after researching on the gaps that exist in the community. Commencing in January 2021, the SMU Pro Bono Centre Mediation Clinic, which will be administered by the Pro Bono Centre with the help of professional mediators and SMU Law students, will provide pro bono mediation services to the financially disadvantaged in Singapore. (Please see Annex 2 for more details.)

Professor of Law Chan Wing Cheong, who is also Director of the SMU Pro Bono Centre, said, “2020 has been a tumultuous year, with pro bono placements involving physical interaction being cancelled during the circuit breaker, nevertheless we are pleased that the Class of 2020 managed to achieve the highest average number of approved pro bono hours in the last four years. I am also heartened that SMU Law students tapped on their creative talents, legal expertise and tenacity to give back to the community.”

“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. To all our partners, we thank you for believing in us and supporting our efforts 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 also released its 2020 annual report this month. The SMU Pro Bono Centre free Legal Clinic which started in 2013 has grown from a fortnightly service to a weekly service since 2017. Between January and September 2020, the Clinic saw a total of 199 applicants, 74.4% of whom are Singaporeans, and 41.2% earned less than \$4,000 per month.

The Pro Bono Centre’s 2020 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 it to others. Most applicants found out about the Legal Clinic through online resource (48.3%), family members (18.5%) and the Law Society Pro Bono Services (9.3%). In 2020, the most common issues presented at the Legal Clinic comprised family issues (18.6%), employment issues (13.1%), Covid-19 related issues (8.5%), tenancy issues (8.0%) and criminal matters (7.0%).

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#### Enclosures:

- Annex 1: Profiles of award recipients
- Annex 2: About the RHT Rajan Menon Foundation Pro Bono Challenge
- Annex 3: 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 11,000 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](http://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 five legal research centres focusing on A.I. and data governance, computational law, cross-border commercial law, international dispute resolution and intellectual property. [www.law.smu.edu.sg](http://www.law.smu.edu.sg)

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## Annex 1

### Profiles of award recipients

**Name:** MS SHIM EUNKYUNG

**Award:** Winner of Spirit of Pro Bono Award (JD). She clocked the most number of approved pro bono hours (424.5 hours) among the graduating JD cohort in 2020

- **Academic / career background** – A business major who graduated from Ewha Woman's University, Eunkyung had worked at a state-owned power plant engineering & construction company in Korea for about five and half years before joining SMU's JD programme. "One of the roles I took on while working was to deal with construction claims. I really enjoyed the work and it propelled me to apply for law school. I applied to SMU in Singapore because it's a common law jurisdiction (which is what I wanted, so I could continue to work on international projects) and there are lots of construction projects in Southeast Asia."
- **On what motivates her to contribute way beyond the required pro bono hours to the Singapore community** – "I don't have a track record of being an active local volunteer in my previous incarnation as a non-law person. It was only when I started to read Law in SMU when I began to grapple with the question of, 'how can a person know so much but still decide not to get involved?' I have always felt that it is by pure stroke of luck that I am living the way I am now. I could have easily been born into the life of someone else who lacks power, money and the general comforts of life. I decided that I wanted to be someone I could live with, and to do that, I wanted to find ways I could use my legal skills to help someone else."
- **Her role models** – "One role model who has weighed most heavily on my mind recently is Doctor James Orbinski, as he emphasised that it is not enough to simply want to do good. You have to go further and have a proper plan and take action. His book, An Imperfect Offering, which chronicles his personal journey and struggles about working on the frontline at Doctors Without Borders, gave me lots of food for thought."
- **On how she juggles her time** - "For me, what took most of my time and energy was commuting between home and school or the Justice Without Borders office, as I live pretty far from both locations. But this challenge was solved when everyone ended up having to work from home due to COVID-19!"
- **Any key challenges you faced doing pro bono work?** – "A major struggle for me was trying to figure out where to draw the line between empathy and reserve. I didn't want to not care about whoever I was assisting, but I had to be careful not to see myself as that person because that would blur the line and impair my ability to assist. I overcame this somewhat by taking a step back and asking myself, how is the way I feel now helping this person?"
- **On how pro bono work has made an impact in her life** – "Through pro bono work, I've been forced to think long and hard about the kind of person I want to be. I don't want to be someone preaching morality sitting on a high horse."
- **Comparing Singapore and Korea, are there similarities / differences between the pro bono culture, or the issues that pro bono lawyers assist with?** – "There are certainly some issues that are commonly found in both countries: providing legal assistance to abused women, workers that have been denied their rightful salaries, migrant workers, etc. The pro bono culture is similar in the sense that there are similar routes in Korea to do pro bono (ex. pro bono clinics run

by the city, court, school, governmental organizations, etc.) but slightly different because I think there is a wider variety of NGOs in Korea that students or lawyers can be involved with. The Good Law, for instance, is an NGO in Korea that monitors the media, court hearings, and the National Assembly, so the pro bono work there is not necessarily limited to helping individuals.”

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**Name:** MS ONG JIA XIN ABIGAIL

**Award:** Winner of Spirit of Pro Bono Award (LLB). She clocked the most number of approved pro bono hours (138.8 hours) among her graduating LLB cohort

- **On how she juggles her time** – “It definitely involved some degree of sacrifice on all fronts at times and foregoing things that I would have otherwise loved to do like catching up with friends or sleep. But I personally believe that if there’s a will, there will be a way! I think Law students are all but too familiar with the heavy reading load for classes and the many exacting demands of our course. One practical way for me was to plan my schedule ahead of time and identify when were my busier periods, like for upcoming project weeks or the leadup to events that I was involved in, and when I would otherwise have some “downtime” that I could more actively participate in pro bono. Even if I couldn’t commit much, I tried my best to find pro bono opportunities that could work with my schedule, be it for a couple of hours in between classes at SMU’s own pro bono clinic or during term breaks when I could devote longer periods to helping out at places like the Legal Aid Bureau (LAB) or Criminal Legal Aid Scheme (CLAS).

Having the strong support of my family was a great boost to me as well as they constantly encouraged me to do what I love and to volunteer my time to help others if it was well within my ability to do so.”

- **On her motivation / role model to contribute way beyond the required hours** – “Personally, community service always meant more to me than just another graduation requirement. My conviction and faith have shaped my view that if I can set aside a few hours to help someone in need in any way, it is well worth it at the end of the day. I am also inspired by my dad who is working in the social service sector and am always encouraged by his stories on what his organisation’s work has done to impact and bring hope to someone’s life.

I remember Year 1 and 2 were especially difficult for me when I was still finding my footing in Law school and taking on responsibilities in organising committees for events like Law Camp and Law Grad Night and later on in the Bar as Marketing Director. Even as I became a senior, Law school felt really overwhelming at times and it was easy to become consumed by just the daily grind.

However, it was during these times that doing pro bono and community service projects actually grounded me and reminded me why I wanted to study Law in the first place. I could see how real lives were being impacted by legal aid and how a lawyer could truly give back to others in such a purposeful way. I especially loved my interactions with the people I encountered during pro bono and it encouraged me greatly to do more – with the applicants, being a listening ear to understand their troubles and visibly seeing them more at ease after the session; with the volunteer lawyers, hearing from their wealth of experience; and with the other law students, always having great fun working together as well! I felt a genuine sense of satisfaction and happiness after every pro bono session and loved this “human” side of the Law.”

- **What are some of the challenges you have met and how did you overcome them?** – “Something I realised early on is that your university years are what you make out of it and it’s really up to yourself to plan your time and balance any commitments you choose to take on. Managing these commitments and sacrificing sleep along the way was one of my toughest challenges as I tried to stay on top of things to the best of my ability. Having a sense of self-motivation and discipline were important to keep me focused.

Another was being able to communicate effectively and deal with applicants at the Pro Bono Centre during sessions. Language barrier sometimes impeded communication with applicants and as a student who felt more familiar with cases and hypotheticals, dealing with real life situations and personal skills were often not things that I could learn in the classroom. I would try and make it a point to welcome them warmly to the clinic and answer any queries they might have about pro bono or legal processes. I also compiled a list of commonly used legal phrases and words in Mandarin to have on hand in case the applicant felt more comfortable in speaking Mandarin and this helped me to connect better with such applicants.”

- **How pro bono work has made an impact in her life** – “One of my greatest takeaway was a volunteer lawyer’s reminder at the end of a session that we should always practise empathy and patience towards whoever is seated in front of us, and to remember that often times, a person who comes to us for help would not understand legal processes and are emotionally charged and tired by everything that they are dealing with at this point. Hence, it is purely understandable that we should be more patient, develop more empathy towards them and consider things from their perspective.

I was also able to gain a more nuanced understanding of what social and legal issues others from different socio-economic backgrounds would usually face. I had the privilege of witnessing the real impact of this much needed legal assistance on the applicants and how it empowered them to make more informed legal decisions. It showed me how the skills and legal knowledge that I have accumulated through my law school journey can also be put to better use to help these beneficiaries.

Being involved in pro bono work reminded me that the society we are in will be more gracious and caring if we simply contribute in the ways that we can and that we always have the capacity to help someone out there. This is something I will carry on with me for years to come.”

**Name:** MR RICHARD TAN MING KIRK

**Award:** Volunteer lawyer who has participated the most number of times in the Legal Clinic in 2020\*

*\*This is the second consecutive year Richard is receiving this award. This is also the sixth year he is participating in SMU Pro Bono Centre Legal Clinic; he received the five-year long service award in 2019.*

- **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 more than 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 six years ago, I volunteered at SMU as well."

- **Other community service commitments** – Besides volunteering at legal clinics about two to three nights a month, he is vice-chair of the Project Law Help Committee of Law Society Pro Bono Services, which is involved in legal assistance for charities and community organisations.

Earlier in 2020, he stepped down as the second longest-serving 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). He is also currently 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. Volunteering actually began more with a belief that it is an obligation to help those less fortunate but increasingly I consider it a privilege to be able to do so as well."

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**Name:** MR ALVIN ONG CHEE KEONG

**Award:** Volunteer lawyer receiving five-year long service award for participating in the SMU Pro Bono Centre Legal Clinic

- **Career background** – Mr Ong graduated from SMU School of Law as part of its pioneer batch, and has been practising as a commercial disputes lawyer since. He is a commercial lawyer with experience in litigation, international arbitration, corporate insolvency and insurance recovery. He assists clients from various industries, with particular focus on the shipping and energy sectors. He is also an Accredited Specialist in Maritime and Shipping Law under the Singapore Academy of Law's Specialist Accreditation Scheme.
- **On how his pro bono journey started** – "My pro bono journey began in Law school as a member of the School of Law's Pro Bono Club (now called the 'SMU Law Outreach Club'). I assisted at various community legal clinics in an administrative capacity, helping to facilitate the clinic sessions for the applicants and volunteer lawyers. Aside from SMU's Pro Bono Centre's legal clinics, I also volunteer at community legal clinics at Kreta Ayer Community Centre and Telok Blangah Community Centre. I also participate in some *ad hoc* pro bono activities, such as giving talks during Law Awareness Week organised by the Law Society of Singapore's Pro Bono Services Office and projects under the auspices of my firm."
- **On how he juggles his time** - "I am very fortunate that my former managing director, Mr S Mohan (who is now a Judicial Commissioner of the Singapore Supreme Court), has always been very supportive of my involvement in pro bono work. My current managing director, Mr Bernard

Yee, also fosters a workplace culture which is conducive for members of our team to participate in pro bono causes. On the home front, my capable wife Wei Ying makes it easy for me to continue volunteering despite us welcoming our baby daughter into the family last year. She shares my view that it is important to give back to society in what little way we can, and keenly supports my continued involvement in volunteer work.”

- **Any word of advice to young law students/graduates about volunteering?** – “It is my sincere belief that the true measure of a society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members; consequently, lawyers (as well as future lawyers) have a moral obligation to ensure that the less-privileged members of our society continues to have access to justice, especially in the face of economic and public health challenges.

While it may be difficult to find time to volunteer in the first few years of practice, I hope that Law students and graduates will eventually be able to set aside some time for pro bono causes once they are more established in their careers. Besides, pro bono work has the helpful collateral effect of helping to sharpen our legal skills, and for some of us, to remind us why we aspired to be part of this honourable profession in the first place.”

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## Annex 2

### **About the RHT Rajan Menon Foundation Pro Bono Challenge**

The competition was launched in 2019. SMU Law students were asked to come up with ideas of projects that will help to solve an unmet legal need after researching on the gaps that exist in the community. A prize of \$2000 is awarded to the winning team, which they can choose to spend on implementing their winning idea, or otherwise.

The Mediation and Negotiation Club was declared the winner of the inaugural competition for their idea of a SMU Pro Bono Centre Mediation Clinic.

Commencing in January 2021, the SMU Pro Bono Centre Mediation Clinic will be administered by the Pro Bono Centre with the help of professional mediators and SMU Law students. The Clinic provides pro bono (free of charge) mediation services to the financially disadvantaged in Singapore.

Mediation is a dispute resolution mechanism where parties negotiate with each other with a neutral third party (the mediator) facilitating the process. The mediator guides the parties towards a mutually beneficial solution to resolve the dispute. In contrast to a judge or arbitrator, the mediator does not make any finding or judgment, provide solutions or legal advice. Mediation is a good alternative to litigation since parties are able to save time and money because lawyers are not involved, and they have control over the process.

The Mediation Clinic will be held at the SMU Pro Bono Centre. Members of the public who are keen to find out more can contact [probonocentre@smu.edu.sg](mailto:probonocentre@smu.edu.sg).

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### Annex 3

#### **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.

Graduates in the LLB and JD Class of 2020 contributed an average of 135.1 hours and 66.7 hours respectively in community service each. It is also noteworthy to highlight that more than one quarter of them not only completed all of their community service hours in approved pro bono but in fact exceeded the requirements.

While only 20 hours of approved pro bono was required of them, the cohort completed an average of 48 approved pro bono hours each. This is a remarkable achievement considering the many competing demands on the time of law students and the disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

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