

MS JENNIE CHUA'S EULOGY
FOR MR S. R. NATHAN
FRIDAY, 26 AUGUST 2016

Mr Nathan loved to write letters – handwritten ones, not emails. Many of his friends would have received these personalised notes from him; written with a instrument of his choice, a S\$2.20 uniball signo black broad-tipped pen, in his characteristic cursive handwriting, always dated and signed. Like the man himself, his words were warm, encouraging, heartfelt and inspiring.

Such were also the defining qualities which Mr Nathan brought to the social service sector. Today, as we give thanks for his life, allow me to share with you a few of his letters from the heart.

Mr Nathan was President of Singapore. He could have simply lent his office to various causes. But he was so committed to the social service sector that he wanted to be directly involved in our work. As Patron in Chief of the National Council of Social Service and the Community Chest, Mr Nathan was present at, and participated in, many charity events. From school fundraising functions to large corporate occasions, he was there to personally engage beneficiaries, donors and the volunteer welfare organisations. He would make every effort to speak to as many people as possible, and was so obliging in acceding to requests for photo-taking, that a short walk to the door as he departed an event could take up to 45 minutes! Organising his menu was a bit simpler, he did not care about the items so long as the main dish was mee goreng.

At one of the charity gala dinners organised by Community Chest, Mr Nathan noticed how the organising committee and I had to deal with a couple of difficult donors. I was tired and probably showed it. The next morning, I received a handwritten note from him. A line read: “*some of us have greater burdens to bear, I know it was not*

easy for you”. I am certain I was not the only one who received such a letter. And mind you, it was never a standard template – no two letters from him were the same. Someone told me that Mr Nathan never plagiarises himself.

Another letter in 2010 was to GK Goh, then Chairman of the National Museum of Singapore. The letter was sent out the day after the successful launch of “Presidential Presents”. Mr Nathan once again had the working team in mind. He wrote: ***“I must compliment all the museum officials for a well laid out and tastefully presented display. Kindly convey to them my appreciation and in particular to Iskander Mydin for enlightening me about each item.”***

Of course, one cannot talk about Mr Nathan’s contribution to the social service sector without frequently mentioning President’s Challenge, which he started in the year 2000. The largest annual community-driven movement in Singapore, it raised over S\$100 million over 12 years to help needy children, families, the elderly, the disabled and many others.

Mr Nathan worked hard to make a success of President’s Challenge. He called upon all his contacts. If he knew you could contribute in one way or another, he would call you. What started out as a week-long affair, eventually became a year-long campaign. Smaller charities and those who had difficulty raising funds on their own were on his beneficiaries list of President’s Challenge.

Mr Nathan was a mentor to many of us serving in the social service sector. Ang Bee Lian, Director of Social Welfare at the Ministry of Social and Family Development, worked closely with Mr Nathan when she was Chief Executive of the National Council of Social Service. Bee Lian published a book “What is Social Work?” in 2015. In a letter to Bee Lian, one can feel Mr Nathan’s strong passion for social service. ***“I also looked through your Book,” he wrote, “which I think will be useful***

for those entering social work. Often, all we have is a bleeding heart and not knowing how and where to begin. This is especially so with the young, who are all attracted to the idea of doing good.”

Over the years, Mr Nathan became convinced that Singapore corporations have a critical role to play in fostering a spirit of giving. Mr Nathan himself had received a bursary from Shell to study at a university. Retiring from the presidency gave him more time to devote to involving corporations in social work. He was invited by many organisations to sit on their advisory boards, but he accepted one offer – as Chairman of CapitaLand Hope Foundation, the philanthropic arm of CapitaLand.

Just a month ago on 26 July 2016, Mr Nathan wrote a letter to Tan Bee Leng, General Manager of Hope Foundation. The letter accompanied a framed photograph of three women in traditional dress carrying goods with shoulder-poles and crossing a vast span of sand dunes. This stunning picture was taken by Desmond Yong, Mr Nathan’s devoted special assistant. Mr Nathan wrote in his letter: ***“I have found a picture that depicts what we strive to achieve through HOPE (foundation). It is my interpretation of this picture.”***

Mr Nathan had the text of his interpretation engraved on the picture frame. It very much sums up his mission to promote social service in Singapore. The engraving read: ***“The desert is barren, dunes of sands in the horizon. United we struggle together, for there is... HOPE.”***

Mr Nathan was my friend and mentor for 47 years. I first met him in 1969 when I was a student at Cornell University. There were three Singaporeans at the university then 1969-1970 -- Goh Kian Chee, Ho Min Fong and me. After attending a conference at New York City, he took a Greyhound bus to Ithaca, where Cornell is located – a journey of some 6-7 hours. I cooked curry chicken for Mr Nathan, made from

evaporated milk and curry powder. He stayed over at a local inn and left the next morning to return to New York City, to catch a flight home. He had just come to see for himself how we were doing and to pass messages to us from our families. We kept in contact over the years since then, meeting mostly over meals -- official banquets, fund-raising events, birthday dinners and (most treasured of all) “mee rebus” lunches at Ceylon Road. In fact, I had been looking forward to our next lunch on 18 August but he was admitted to hospital before then.

At a fund-raising event a decade ago, I had expressed admiration for a beautiful saree Mrs Nathan was wearing. I had noted that saree material could be made into nice jackets and dresses. A few weeks later, a parcel arrived from the Istana, containing an exquisite deep brown saree with silver white flowers. The accompanying note said the saree was from Mrs Nathan. The jacket I am wearing today is made from that saree.

Thank you Mr Nathan for your kindness and generosity, and for giving all of us in the social service space – donors, caregivers, volunteers and beneficiaries – courage and hope.

Good bye, Sir, may you rest in peace... We will miss you, but will always celebrate your life and take care of Mrs Nathan.