

**SPEECH BY PRESIDENT THARMAN SHANMUGARATNAM AT THE LAUNCH
OF REFRESHED PRESIDENT'S CHALLENGE AND GRANT CALL FOR 2025,
4 SEPTEMBER 2024, 4.00PM, DELTA SPORTS COMPLEX**

Mr James Chia, Vice President, Singapore Disability Sports Council

Mr Aubeck Kam, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Social and Family
Development, and President's Challenge Council Co-Chair

Ms Teoh Zsin Woon, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Culture, Community
and Youth, and President's Challenge Council Co-Chair

Professor Lily Kong, President of Singapore Management University and
President's Challenge Council Co-Chair

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Thank you for joining me at this launch of the refreshed President's Challenge.

2. It has been nearly a year since I took office as President. In my swearing-in speech, I spoke about the importance of deepening our sense of togetherness as Singaporeans. No matter how difficult the surprises thrown at us, **our strength as a nation will lie in our ability to stand together, to support each other, and to deepen the respect we accord to our fellow citizens, of all backgrounds and in every walk of life**, the respect for all that is at the heart of our solidarity as Singaporeans.

3. The President's Challenge was started by then-President S R Nathan in 2000, to rally Singaporeans to help build a more caring and cohesive society, and to help the less fortunate. Over the years, it has expanded its scope, and adopting annual themes such as supporting mental health, empowering people with disabilities, and caring for caregivers.

4. The Government's policies have shifted significantly at the same time. social spending has more than quadrupled. Community donations to the Community Chest have grown, with contributions to social causes seeing the largest share of giving as well as volunteering. And we have also witnessed the significant growth of non-governmental platforms for social good.

5. **These are positive developments**, and they are helping us create a broader landscape of giving and volunteerism, for many social causes.

6. It is therefore timely that we are refreshing and **repurposing the President's Challenge**. Its basic aim, going beyond immediate needs, will be to achieve **sustained social impact: by uplifting aspirations and potential, especially amongst those who start with greater odds**.

7. In line with this focus, we will shift from a model of one-off funding to **longer-term funding** of deserving initiatives. It will give the benefiting organisations time to build up their capabilities, scale up social innovations, and make a meaningful impact.

8. Beyond social upliftment, President's Challenge will also extend its focus to include the **arts and sports as fields for nurturing potential**, especially among those less advantaged, and to enable budding talents to sustain their development.

9. In both sports and the arts, success is shaped by talent, but it also **depends greatly on chances and even surprises**.

10. Many of our best first stumbled upon something by chance, discovered they could be good at it and got some joy out of it, and then spent years developing themselves in the art or sport. Or they sometimes switched to another craft or event well after they got started, before finding their deepest talent. **We want to widen those chances and opportunities for every talent to be discovered, and help them sustain their development over the years**.

- a. **Nur Syahidah Alim**, our top para-archer, is an example. Born with diplegia, she was exempted from doing PE or physical CCAs during her school years, although she very much wanted to take part. But it was at 18, when she attended an expo by Singapore Disability Sports Council (SDSC), that she discovered archery by chance, and has not looked back since.
- b. **Goh Chui Leng**, who broke K Jayamani's 40-year record in the women's 1500m in 2017, and now holds several national long-distance records, did not start on that path. She was a high-jumper at MacPherson Secondary School. She then stumbled on the 400m in Junior College at Hwa Chong Institution (HCI) when they needed a runner to complete the 4x400m relay team, and found she was very good at it. Fortunately, she got an NUS Sports Scholarship that enabled her to keep running. But it was only at age 25 that she decided to switch to the longer distances, and was going on 30 before she broke Jayamani's record. Chui Leng is still running, and knows she can go faster yet.
- c. **Nazri Sutari**, who represented Singapore in Kickboxing and Sambo at the SEA Games, and is a SEA Gold medal-winner in Sambo, actually started as a fencer in secondary school. He chanced upon martial arts while in polytechnic, and began to have success in Muay Thai, Mixed Martial Arts, Wrestling, and subsequently Kickboxing.

d. We see many of these stories of chance and surprises in the arts too. Like **Wong Kah Chun**, who now helms the Japan Philharmonic as its Chief Conductor, and has also this month begun his five-year term as principal conductor and artistic advisor of The Halle, a renown symphony orchestra in the United Kingdom. How did it all start? Kah Chun told me that when he was in Jurong Primary School, his form teacher, who was also in charge of the school's brass band, passed every pupil in class a parent's consent form in the hope they would sign up for the band. So he got the form signed, and ended up learning to play the cornet. He went on to the trumpet at secondary school, and eventually got a National Arts Council (NAC) scholarship and studied conducting. So when you look at Kah Chun perform with aplomb on the world stage, think of that chance he got at Jurong Primary School.

e. We all saw the **students dancing hip-hop** at the recent NDP. What I found later, is that many of them had no experience in any form of dancing. Mr Lawrence Lim, Physical Education department head at Yuying Secondary, decided to convert students from other CCAs into dancers, putting them through intensive training from scratch. Some, Like Mohd Ilhan, a guitar player, have now turned hip-hop dancer. It's another example, not uncommon, of how opportunities really matter in discovering talent.

Collaborating with Like-minded Partners to Advance PC's Goals

11. Whether in the social sector, the arts or sports, the President's Challenge will seek to promote a shared commitment and responsibility for our goals of **uplifting aspirations and potential, especially amongst those who start with greater odds.**

12. It will complement the Government's efforts through **a whole civic fabric**, weaving in philanthropies and corporates, and volunteers with empathy and mentorship skills.

13. President's Challenge will work with leading foundations as well as agencies who share its goals and principles, leveraging their expertise, networks, and capabilities. These partners will support selected President's Challenge beneficiaries, including through co-funding, tracking their progress, and mentorship.

14. We will also work with philanthropic partners to mobilise contributions, including through multi-year funding, in keeping with our aim to provide sustained support for deserving initiatives.

15. On sports, President's Challenge will partner SportSG to expand chances and **thicken the pipeline of future talents, including by supporting SportSG's partnerships with schools.**

16. President's Challenge will also give an extra lift to **disability sports**. I just met several of our para-athletes in Paris, and here at SDSC's programmes. They show us all what is possible.

a. **Jovin Tan**, our Paralympian who was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy at the age of two started off in sailing. Through the support of SDSC's Pathway and Performance team, discovered a new passion and now competes in Boccia. "A smooth sea never made skilled sailor", an African proverb that I understand Jovin proudly bears on his chest, is a testament to his fighting spirit.

b. Likewise, **Colin Soon**, visually-impaired, at a young age of 19, has already clinched multiple medals at the ASEAN Para Games. His coaches from SDSC's SwimTogether programme are key - curating individualised training for Colin, and supported him in his aspiration to compete at major games.

President's Challenge Fellowships

17. The refreshed President's Challenge will also provide fellowships aimed at developing young civic leaders and recognising individuals pursuing second chances in life.

- a. I visited The New Charis Mission (TNCM) earlier this year, a halfway house for ex-drug addicts and offenders, which also runs rehabilitation and preventive programmes. It was also where I met Robin Tay. He only completed PSLE, had been in and out of detention barracks and prison six times by the age of 18 and went on to serve another 12 years behind bars. Robin is a turn-around story. Now 48, he holds a Masters in Counselling and counsels inmates and at-risk youth in prisons and schools.
- b. Another example is Kim Whye Kee, who served 10 years in jail for a series of crimes. He too has turned his life around. He became co-founder of Beacon of Life, an initiative that helps at-risk youth that is now part of Tasek Academy, and is an accomplished ceramicist and proud founder of Qi Pottery. Whye Kee will be doing his first overseas solo exhibition in Munich later this month.
- c. Robin and Whye Kee are just some examples of why second chances are necessary. We must give each and every one of them the opportunity to play their part and be beacons of hope.

President's Challenge Council

18. I would like to thank the leaders from various fields, ranging from arts, sports, social sectors, businesses and philanthropies, for coming forward to serve on the new President's Challenge Council. And thanks to Permanent Secretaries Aubeck Kam and Teoh Zsin Woon, and Prof Lily Kong, for agreeing to co-chair the council. I have full trust in their ability to take forward our new vision for President's Challenge,

What this ultimately serves

19. The Forward Singapore movement will be an ongoing national journey. As PM Wong has emphasized, it must involve recognising diverse talents and moving beyond traditional metrics of success, to build a society where everyone feels valued and has the opportunity to contribute, no matter their starting point.

20. The President's Challenge will be a partner in this national journey. It will ultimately be at the service of the **broader and more vibrant meritocracy and tighter social compact that we are developing in Singapore:**

- One which motivates everyone to develop themselves to the fullest, but also actively nurtures those who have to overcome greater odds
- One that creates as best as we can a level playing field, but more than that, different playing fields for everyone to discover their talents as they grow
- One where we all feel the wind when someone braves the odds, aspires for excellence and succeeds
- One that is made not only by government policies, teachers and coaches, but by the whole community
- And one that ultimately breeds a culture of respect for all, that brings us closer together.