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SPEECH BY MS GRACE FU, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE, MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, AT THE SOCIETY FOR THE PHYSICALLY DISABLED (SPD) EDUCATION PROGRAMME AWARDS PRESENTATION CEREMONY ON SATURDAY, 30 JANUARY 2010, AT 10.30AM AT SINGAPORE BOTANIC GARDENS, FUNCTION HALL.

Ms Chia Yong Yong
President, Society for the Physically Disabled

Distinguished guests

Students

Ladies and gentlemen

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1 Good morning to one and all. It gives me great pleasure to celebrate the new academic year with you.

2 I understand that this annual event garners the largest turnout of students, parents, educators, as well as corporate partners. This is very encouraging as it reflects that many segments of society are engaged in supporting inclusive and integrated education opportunities for all.

3 During this period of economic downturn, more families may face difficulties when their breadwinners lose their jobs or suffer a pay cut. Our commitment is to that no student is denied a sound education because of financial difficulties.

4 Despite economic uncertainties, we will continue to invest in our human capital by building a world class education system. One of the hallmarks of a world class education system is to be responsive to the diverse learning needs. I am glad to see that the Society for the Physically Disabled (SPD) Education Programme has evolved from its early days of providing financial awards alone to providing a holistic range of services and programmes to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The inaugural SPD Youth Aspiration Award, given to those who have demonstrated strong interest and involvement in the fields of visual and performing arts, sports and community service is an excellent addition. The Award will add as an encouragement to youths, to nurture their talents and to realize their potential.

WINNING PARTNERSHIPS

5 The goal of building a world class education system cannot be accomplished by just the Ministry of Education and our schools. Nurturing the next generation requires the participation of the community. The community plays an important role in helping students with physical disabilities overcome their challenges. It is commendable that socially responsible organisations like NatSteel Holdings Pte Ltd, Credit Suisse and Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation have come forward in this challenging climate to offer invaluable financial and community support through the sponsorship of bursaries and scholarships.

6 This “many helping hands” approach is an important hallmark of our development to become a more gracious, compassionate and inclusive society. It is heartening to see voluntary welfare organisations and corporate partners

working together in to support students with physical disabilities. This opportunity allows our students to pursue and excel in their academic and non-academic aspirations.

SCALING YOUR OWN 'EVEREST'

7 I wish to mention two extraordinary individuals who have shown that they are able to overcome life's challenges: Jason Oh Boon Keng and Gopinath s/o Subash. They are the recipients of the inaugural SPD Youth Aspiration Award.

8 Jason, aged 20 with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, is in his second year at Ngee Ann Polytechnic studying Psychology and Community Services. Despite his condition, he has persevered in his studies and has composed and performed songs at many events. He also challenges himself physically by playing competitive sports such as power soccer and boccia (pronounced as 'botcha'), a Paralympics ball sport for disabled athletes. Gopinath, aged 17 with left hemiplegia, has just completed his 'N' levels and is furthering his studies in ITE. He has motivated himself to pursue his passion in singing and has also performed at various charity events. His talent was recognized when he received the Asian Women's Welfare Association (AWWA) TEACH ME Young Talent Award (Music) in 2007.

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CONCLUSION

9 Jason and Gopinath's determination to pursue their passions and contribute to the community is an inspiration to all of us. I hope their accomplishments will serve as an encouragement to their peers and other students to emulate them.

10 I congratulate also all award winners for your academic success and achievements. You have worked hard and have done well to be here today.

This is the beginning of an exciting journey for you and I wish you continuing success in the years ahead.

11 Thank you

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