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SPEECH BY MR S DHANABALAN, MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, AT THE CLOSING CEREMONY OF THE 7TH
SENIOR CITIZENS' WEEK AT THE KALLANG COMMUNITY CENTRE,
45 BOON KENG ROAD ON 6 DEC 85 AT 7.30 PM

The organisers of this year's 7th Senior Citizens' Week have made considerable efforts to bring about a greater awareness of the problems, needs and potentials of senior citizens. Sometimes, public ignorance of a social problem can result in public rejection of the people who constitute that problem. Thus public education of social problems is vital. An understanding of the ageing process can open the window to increasing opportunities for our senior citizens to continue to lead a full life in the community.

Many people have a stereotype image of the senior citizen. They see him as an aged person tottering towards his grave and, who by implication, is useless, or even worse, a burden to his family and society. This is not only debilitating to the senior citizen but also robs him of his worth and dignity. Prejudice, ignorance and false assumptions take a long time to dismantle. But a start has to be made to dismantle them. The organising of this annual Senior Citizens' Week is a good beginning. But much more remains to be done.

The Senior Citizens' Week must not be seen as an end in itself, but as an opportunity for other parts of the community to educate the public on the problems, needs and potentials of senior citizens.

The family is still the most influential agent of educating the child. Families need to instil in the minds of our young respect for the elderly and filial piety towards one's parents. As parents and guardians, our responsibility to our children does not end with the provision of adequate food, clothing, shelter and schooling. We need to ensure that our children grow up with a concern for each other's welfare and well-being within the family and are imbued with a deep sense of respect for the elderly in the family and the community. This is best achieved not so much by words but by deeds of goodwill, understanding and empathy for the senior citizens in our midst.

The aged themselves can do a lot to remove negative attitudes towards ageing. If they give the impression that they are worthless then others will believe that they are worthless. They must do their part to reduce their dependence on the family and the community by trying to stay as fit, mentally and physically, as possible. Much of the sense of dependency and social isolation that often creeps into old age is the result of a lack of poor preparedness for old age. A retiree must be financially prepared. We have rightly laid great emphasis on savings in the CPF as the mainstay of financial security in old age. But I hope that we will never arrive at a situation where children think that they have no responsibility or duty to take care of their parents and elders because they have CPF savings. There is a pernicious philosophy that each generation only has an obligation to the next generation and no obligation to the previous generation. We must reject this philosophy totally. An aged retired person who has to partly or fully depend on his children should not be seen as an object of charity but as an opportunity to fulfil the duties and obligations of children to elders.

The cultivation of hobbies, recreational activities, physical exercises, the enjoyment of art and music, the habit of reading and writing, being involved in the upbringing of grandchildren, all help to keep the aged mentally and physically alert and alive to the world. When a person retires from work, he or she should not look upon it as retirement from the world. It must be seen as an opportunity to pursue old interest more vigorously and to start new interests.

Preparation for old age should start when we are young and vigorous and should not be done only when we are on the eve of our retirement. Life, should not be all work to earn a living, important though this is, but should also include the cultivation of a person in the spiritual sense. Only then will we be able to move gracefully and actively from earning a living into retirement.

Public education on the aged is a continuing process and can be promoted by everyone. The organisers of the 7th Senior Citizens' Week have done a good promotion job. May I extend my thanks and appreciation to the Singapore Action Group of Elders, the Government Pensioners' Association, the Bukit Merah Old Folks' Club, the Chong Hua Tong Tou Teck Hwee, the Geylang West Constituency Senior Citizens' Recreation Centre, the Marine Parade Senior Citizens' Club, the Residents' Committee Central Secretariat, the People's Association, the Singapore Council of Social Service, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Community Development and all those who have helped in the event.

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