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Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GOH CHOK TONG AT THE LAUNCH OF THE SINGAPORE KINDNESS WEEK 2000, AT THE ROCK AUDITORIUM, SUNTEC CITY MALL, ON SATURDAY, 8 APRIL 2000, AT 11.00AM

Two years ago, when I launched the inaugural Singapore Kindness Week, we were in the midst of an economic crisis. At that time, I said that people's behaviour might be adversely affected by the downturn because during tough times, people had a tendency to look after themselves first. But I also said that it was precisely during such times that kindness was needed to maintain balance and harmony in our society.

I am glad that we have emerged from this test of character with credit. Our people pulled together and helped each other through the difficult time. Many made small personal sacrifices for family members and friends. Even strangers were not forgotten. For example, during the devastating Turkish earthquake last year, Singaporeans from all walks of life donated spontaneously to help the victims living half a world away.

Or take the recent case where a woman with four young children

lost her husband in a road accident. The husband was the sole breadwinner of the family. Many Singaporeans rallied to help her. What struck me was that a man, a total stranger, offered to give this family a sum of \$200 every month until the children grow up. That is indeed an act of kindness.

More volunteers, both the man-in-the-street and young professionals, continue to sign up for community work with the National Council of Social Service, the Singapore International Foundation and other volunteer groups. The past two years have been difficult but that did not dampen the volunteer spirit. This is heartening and we must continue to encourage more to sign up. Meanwhile, as noted by Mr Noel Hon, the Singapore Kindness Movement or SKM has doubled its membership since its inception three years ago. It now has over 350 corporate members, including 178 schools. I understand that more than 100,000 students have participated in various SKM programmes since the Movement was launched in 1997.

These are positive signs but we still have some way to go. We must continue to encourage people to perform kind acts spontaneously and regularly. The Singapore Kindness Week is intended to do just that - remind and encourage people to make the lives of others more pleasant through little acts of kindness all year round. We need such a week because sometimes we forget ourselves. The Hello Kitty madness is a stark reminder that kindness and tolerance can disappear in moments of self-interest. I am saddened by the indiscipline of those who provoked the unfortunate incidents. It shows that under certain conditions, even the rational can behave irrationally. That is why we must never stop nurturing kindness in the young. The spirit of kindness is our strongest defence against human failings like selfishness, intolerance and greed.

Everyone is born with the gift to show care, concern and kindness to others. It has nothing to do with wealth, age or physical abilities. In fact, many who are poor have shown more acts of kindness than some who are rich. The way some employers abuse their maids is a disgrace.

As for age, Miss Teresa Hsu, who recently received an award from Her World magazine, has spent a lifetime helping the poor. She is 100 years old. Far from retiring, she continues to do voluntary work.

The disabled too have shown kindness. The founder of Kindness

Inc. in America, Dr Chuck Wall, is visually handicapped. But that has not stopped him from spreading kindness. I was told that when he was here for the Kindness Conference last year, he infected everyone with his energy and good cheer. His role as a kindness crusader is the most cogent proof that no one is too disabled to help his fellow man.

Being kind and caring require no special effort. You need only to perform simple acts of kindness whenever there is a chance to do so. A friendly smile, a warm handshake, a sincere praise, or a cheerful greeting costs nothing but can mean so much to the one who received it. Giving your full attention to someone who is talking to you, offering support to someone with a problem, or helping to heal a rift are other simple ways of saying "I care". They do not demand much effort or great sacrifice. But they can make someone's day.

Anyone who has received kindness will tell you that the experience leaves a lasting impression. Whenever we are feeling cynical, recalling an act of kindness helps to restore our faith in human goodness. The incidents of kindness that I related in my 1998 speech happened a long time ago. Yet they remain crisp in my memory. I am sure you will also have your own kindness stories to tell.

To prove my point, let me put you to a test. Can you name the world's five fastest 100-metres runners in the last decade? If that is difficult, how about the five Nobel Peace Prize winners in the last five years, or the world's five richest men today? If you are unable to, do not feel embarrassed. I do not know the answers myself. The point is, we are talking about world-beaters, the best in their fields. Yet we cannot remember these world famous or fabulously rich people. Now, try thinking of five persons who have helped you in a difficult time or inspired or motivated you in one way or another; say a teacher, a friend, a relative, a neighbour or even a stranger. Isn't this much easier? It was for me. The lesson? The people who make a difference to your life are generally not world-beaters but those who care. So if you have been kind to others, the likelihood is that you would have made a deep impression on that person and in the process changed or brought some joy to his life.

The giver also benefits because giving is an enjoyable experience. Seeing your action makes a difference to the lives of others provides you a sense of self-worth. It brings joy and a sense of well-being into your own

lives. By extension, a kind and humane society enjoys a similar sense of well-being and harmony. Such a society is infinitely stronger because it is based on a shared memory of kindness transcending racial and religious differences.

Kindness is the thread from which we should weave our social fabric. The more threads we weave, the stronger will be our social fabric. By weaving this fabric together, our future generations will enjoy its warmth, comfort and security. It will be a measure of how far we have come as a society and people. For Singapore to become our Best Home, we must be more than just a well-run country. It is like setting up your own home. You can equip your home with all the creature comforts that money can buy, but if there is an absence of considerateness and coziness, it will be a cold and soul-less place.

Two years ago, I challenged the SKM to make itself a truly civic movement by broadening its support base for the message of kindness and getting Singaporeans to embrace and practise it regularly. As Mr Noel Hon has noted, the SKM has been making steady progress. After making inroads into schools with some imaginative programmes, it has gone on to the nurseries and kindergartens. It is now working on programmes for corporations. It is also timely that more grassroots organisations get into the picture. As they are in close contact with the residents, they have an important role to play in helping the SKM. They can start with kindness clusters or kindness fan clubs where the members can get together, share their experiences, spread the message and motivate people to do small acts of kindness.

It is my pleasure now to launch the third Singapore Kindness Week as well as the kindness book, "Always in Season". The book is a compilation of accounts of kind acts that Singaporeans received or witnessed here or overseas. The contributors ranged from 8 to over 70 years old. I hope you will read the book and pass it on to your friends who are not here. Then, more will be inspired to practise acts of kindness regularly.
