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Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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**SPEECH BY MR WONG KAN SENG, MINISTER FOR HOME
AFFAIRS AND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION
AT THE PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION 40TH ANNIVERSARY
CELEBRATIONS LAUNCHING CEREMONY ON SATURDAY, 8
APRIL 2000 AT 9.30AM AT THE PEOPLE'S ASSOCIATION
AUDITORIUM**

National Archives of Singapore

Good morning
Past and present members of the PA family
Ladies and Gentlemen

In the early 1990s, when South Africa was in transition from a one-race-dominated apartheid regime to a all-race-included "Rainbow Nation", some South Africans were trying to understand the difference, if any, between the terms "multi-racial" and "non-racial" that were fashionably used at that time. In a humorous book "Survival Guide to the New South Africa", the tongue-in-cheek answer was: "A multi-racial gathering is one where people of

all races spend the evening telling each other how nice it is to see people of all races getting together, while a non-racial function is one where people of all races spend the evening pretending not to notice anybody else's race.”

2 In Singapore, we do not pretend that differences do not exist. Neither do we superficially go about tolerating differences just to get by, nor force communities to assimilate. Instead, we learn about differences, respect them, and enjoy and celebrate one another's festivals. We are not all the same but that does not mean we do not share important values, experiences, goals and dreams.

3 In this regard, the People's Association (PA) has played the pivotal role over the last 40 years to connect people from different races, cultures and social backgrounds. It has deepened understanding, built trust, and strengthened the quality of interpersonal ties and inter-community interactions. The PA can take credit for providing the common ground on which our multi-racial society has worked, played and lived.

4 The PA is today closely intertwined with the daily lives of Singaporeans. It has given this country a list of familiar acronyms – like CC, RC, CCC and CDC. Few can claim that they do not have a Community Centre or Club (CC), or a Residents' Committee Centre near where they live. The PA also spearheads a diversified range of community development organisations like the Outward Bound Singapore, National Community Leadership Institute, National Youth Council, Seaports Clubs, Social Development Service and so on. Fewer can claim that the PA has not touched them in one way or another.

5 As the PA marches on in this new millennium with renewed vigour and to an even more vibrant beat, we must not forget the trials and tribulations of the formative years. Those were tough times where poverty, unemployment and communal violence were the order of the day. Against this gloomy backdrop, it was no wonder that little fanfare accompanied the inception of this statutory board on 1 July 1960.

6 Anniversaries usually flood the mind with abundant passion and fond memories of the past. The long-serving staff and grassroots leaders joining us

here this morning would have personal experiences of being tested to the limits by communists and secret society members out to vandalise CCs and disrupt activities.

7 But the daily nightmares for staff and volunteers did not just come from communists and thugs. It came from the people. If any staff then was unaware of the realities of multi-racial Singapore, television in the CC made certain that he was fully conscious of them. Not from watching the TV programmes but twiddling those TV knobs that determined whether the crowd should watch an English, Malay, Tamil, Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese or Teochew telecast. The staff had to satisfy an audience, where the staff knew each TV viewer personally and each demanding the programme of his mother tongue. Some staff arbitrarily set out viewing schedules, others took straw polls. It never satisfied everybody. Fights occasionally broke out and some staff were harassed and threatened. Some CCs were fortunate; wealthier residents and commercial firms in those areas saw the plight of the staff and donated a second TV set. These were the early beginnings of real community involvement and active citizenship, especially in CC management.

8 Through the baptism of fire in the 1960s and 1970s, it evolved a PA spirit that is still burning strong today. It is that undefeatable spirit to serve from the heart and to make a difference. That enterprise and tenacity in building an active community. This is recognised in our current recruitment advertisements: “Most careers require your intelligence, passion and lots of guts. Ours require all of the above and your heart”.

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9 Over the years, form and approach have changed to stay abreast with changing times but the spirit and substance remain strong. In the early years, with the set-up of each CC, for the first time in each community, there was someone with access to the government who was sympathetic to the people’s myriad problems. Overnight the staff and volunteers became the community’s marriage counsellor, letter writer, arbitrator of neighbourhood quarrels, legal adviser, translator, odd-job man, kindergarten teacher, job placement officer, projectionist, sports coach, youth leader, dancer in cultural shows and all-round problem solver. Today, we are much bigger and better organised with professional and specialised staff and supported by dedicated volunteers. But the warmth and personal touch are still evident in our services, be it

matchmaking by the Social Development Service or the job fairs and Family Mediation Centres of the Community Development Councils or the Youth-at-Risk programmes of the PA Boys' Clubs and other grassroots organisations.

10 There are many interesting and heart-warming anecdotes from our first generation of staff and volunteers of their tireless efforts to build active communities. I am pleased to note that as part of the 40th Anniversary Celebrations, an exhibition aptly entitled "Four Decades of **PA**ssion" will be held at the Singapore History Museum from September to November this year. The exhibition tells the story of PA through the eyes of then rural liaison officers, centre managers, kindergarten teachers, caretakers, board members and community leaders. Mr Richard Tang of RichArt Enterprises, who generously sponsored the building of the "birthday cake" that I unveiled this morning, was a former CC staff in the 1960s and 1970s. He would no doubt have many personal stories of those pioneering years. It is hoped that the exhibition would bring older Singaporeans through a journey of nostalgia, whilst providing younger Singaporeans gems of fascinating information.

11 I am also happy to note that the roof of this building will be turned into a breathtaking, multi-tier stage for the "Harmony in Motion" Concert on 1 July this year to mark the founding day of PA. Besides being historic and beautiful, this building is indeed a symbol of people connector. First as an airport terminal from the 1930s to 1950s that connected Singapore to the world. Then as PA Headquarters that spearheaded the efforts of connecting citizens with one another and, at the same time, with the government.

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12 Today, as we kick off a nine-month journey of nostalgia, inspiration and vision, I would like to wish the PA many more good years of sterling service to our nation and its people. I have every confidence that the management, staff, grassroots leaders and volunteers will continue to attest to the unyielding spirit of the People's Association and build upon the successes of the organisation.

Thank you

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