

**SPEECH BY MS LEE SU MIN
PRIME MINISTER'S VALEDICTORIAN AWARDEE
SOTA AWARDS 2021
19 MAY 2022, THURSDAY, 8.00PM**

To the class of 2021: do you remember wearing our primary school uniforms on April Fools' Day? Do you miss the curry chicken noodles? Or the daily coffee runs to 7-11? Or the people who we saw every morning for the past 6 years? Or staying in school, from sunrise to after sunset, rushing assignments yet having good company?

It's been an honour to journey with this cohort. Looking back on our years together, I pictured our journey as a trip to an amusement park. Like how security personnel patrol the grounds of the park, prioritising the safety of visitors, the security guards were the first people who we saw in the morning, greeting us with a smile and wishing us a good day ahead. They were the ones whom we bid goodbye to at the end of each long school day. Thank you to the non-teaching staff, such as the security guards, cleaners, canteen vendors, and administrative staff, for looking out for us, and for making our school experiences safe and secure, such that we could focus our time and energy in other ways.

Like how each park has its distinctive features, a distinctive feature of SOTA's would be the integration of the arts and the academics. We were constantly encouraged to be creative, and to draw connections between these two seemingly-disparate areas. With an understanding of both these areas, we then embarked on meaningful projects, such as in our Creativity, Activity and Service component of IB, which shaped a huge part of our school experiences.

Project Wisdom Nest School created sustainable online materials, in the form of videos, teaching primary school students the English Language. These materials were made for the teachers at Wisdom Nest School in Cambodia to use during Covid-19 and beyond. The team also tapped on their arts education by adding interactive elements and arts activities to make the videos aesthetically appealing and engaging for the students.

Project K Thom aimed to empower the Cambodian community in Kampong Thom through an 11-day outreach programme in 2019, and through creating educational booklets about leadership, lifeskills, and first aid in 2020. The team also held an online showcase to raise awareness about the long-term efforts of their partner, NGO SiloamXperience, in creating a vocational and life skills institute.

GPS Ratchaburi served and bonded with the Karen refugee children at Bilay's House, using the arts as their primary tool. Through conducting visual arts, music, and dance lessons online, the team intended to alleviate the children's anxieties during these uncertain times, while helping them realise to their creative potentials.

The cohort has also pursued projects locally. Hopes to Hearts is a project which aims to raise awareness about food insecurity in Singapore. The team of 9 volunteered at grocery packing and distribution sessions, created a website for this ground-up initiative, and produced a 4-part documentary series.

Cassia Kaki is an arts-based CAS that aims to provide support to vulnerable elderlies. Through weekly home visits, the team formed heartfelt connections with the elderly by

listening to and understanding their problems, thereby creating a welcoming and inclusive community amongst the residents of Block 52 Cassia Crescent.

And these are just a few of the many projects. As fresh graduates, others are now embarking on meaningful projects, such as Soul Shall Overcome, a social movement group that advocates mental wellness and literacy among youths and Ocean Purpose Project, a Singaporean Social Enterprise that aims to promote ocean conservation efforts. Others are now also further exploring their passions in the arts.

This amusement park also encouraged us to attempt new rides and to appreciate challenges. A space that inspired us to try new things, supported by a community of teachers and peers. To our teachers, thank you for fuelling our passions in the arts and the academics. From making lessons interactive, to allowing us many opportunities to pursue projects beyond the curriculum and to take our art making to the next level. You had pushed us out of our comfort zones, and always encouraged us to experiment with new ideas. To take the first step to try, instead of fearing failure. Thank you, to the parents who, with the Parents' Support Group, are always supporting us with the care packs and the constant encouragement.

While we were gearing up for the most daunting rollercoaster ride - the IB, we didn't expect Covid to happen. The pandemic took this rollercoaster ride to the next level. One day we were in school, and the next, at home. I remember the panic when our overseas Global Perspectives trips were cancelled in March 2020, or when we realised that we could not use the Science labs to collect data, or for me, when two months of Circuit Breaker meant that I could not practice the harp. But beyond all, our teachers were there to support and guide us from organising online consultations to help us as we struggled, to checking in with us every morning.

Despite these challenges, I think we can all agree that it is this close-knit, bonded community that has made our SOTA experience such a meaningful, memorable, and fulfilling one. While it may seem as though the rides in the amusement park are the highlights of the night, I've come to realise that it's the smaller experiences that we take away and keep in our memories. Watching the one-legged pigeon Jeremy hopp about in the year 6 area, or rushing our Extended Essays and Internal Assessments with the occasionally aggressive wind, or the meaningful conversations that we had while we procrastinated, or rather, took a break from our assignments. Or our busy arts exhibitions and showcases, during which we constantly looked out for each other amidst the hectic rehearsal schedules and always found the time to watch each other bring art to life. Like how the lights and decorations in the amusement park create an inviting and comfortable atmosphere, it was these experiences that made school feel like home. These moments would be the rest stops in the amusement park, where we had the chance to refuel and reflect on our journeys, before trying out the next ride. There was always someone to talk to, from our peers, to our teachers, school staff and counsellors, making it very accessible for us to seek support whenever we felt like we needed it.

There were moments that we had looked forward to, like hugging together and crying during the National Day celebrations, or just spending our assemblies in the hall instead of in our classrooms. Yet, it was within these new limitations that covid presented us with that we found new ways to continue having fun, as a cohort. From table tennis competitions, to after school just dance parties, it was never a dull sight.

Yet, the saying “work hard, play hard” is something that I saw our cohort live up to. While we had fun, we were also serious when it came to lessons. Day after day, I was inspired by how hardworking this cohort was, and seeing everyone put in so much effort into their studies and artistic craft motivated me to keep doing the same.

Some of us choose to pursue both the arts and the academics, while others may choose to pursue one or the other. Regardless of the paths we choose, I believe that our curiosity to learn, our determination to make a change, and our resilience when the going gets tough, will enable us to continue to develop as individuals with a heart for society and with the passion to enrich the lives of others.

To our juniors, keep going. Know that it is okay to falter, but never forget to hold each other up. Look out for each other and treasure the friendships that you make in SOTA, because the friends you make now may be friends of a lifetime. Know that there is a community of teachers and students who are supporting you, and that it is okay to seek help if you feel like you need it.

As we exit the amusement park and turn back to marvel at its existence, yet at the same time look forward to new adventures, thank you, once again, to SOTA and everybody who has been a part of our journeys. We can't wait to venture out into the world, to explore the possibilities, and to contribute meaningfully towards society, as individuals with an appreciation for art, and with the passion to pursue our interests.

And this is just the beginning. Thank you, to the class of 2021, and I wish you all the best in your journeys ahead. Take care, stay safe, and keep in touch, for I believe that we might part, for now, but not for long. I can't wait to see where life takes each of us, and I hope that we keep doing what we love, and loving what we do.