

**SPEECH BY MS ALLISON TAN SUE MIN
PRIME MINISTER'S VALEDICTORIAN AWARDEE
SOTA AWARDS DAY, 16 MAY 2019, THURSDAY, 2.00PM
SOTA CONCERT HALL**

Mr Baey Yam Keng, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Ministry of Culture,
Community and Youth & Ministry of Transport
Mrs Mary Seah

SOTA Board Members

Teachers and staff

Parents, friends

Distinguished guests

Good afternoon.

It is a great honour for me to represent the Class of 2018 with this Valedictorian Speech. A great honour, but also a great headache. Not because my batchmates are a headache (though perhaps some teachers would beg to differ). But rather, because of the sheer diversity of this special group of people I'm thankful to have spent six years with. To me, every single individual within the Class of 2018 stands as a testament to the beauty of being someone boldly different, someone boldly special. And it is difficult to sum up such a colourful cohort within a single speech.

Our cohort was certainly not afraid to stand out. In fact, we seemed to take great pains in our daily life to set ourselves apart from regular students. From developing our own lingo, complete with hand gestures, to spontaneously rearranging the level 5 furniture in our last week of school. Probably much to the horror of the Office of Property Management team (sorry!). We sparked a flash mob culture in SOTA, and redecorated our sweaters with iron-on patches (which unfortunately also seems to have become a trend)... We were a cohort so passionately obsessed with taking whatever we had and throwing it back out, more vibrant, more dynamic, more refreshing, and stamped unmistakably with the brand, CLASS OF 2018.

I'm not sure if we always were like this. I certainly wasn't. At the tender age of 12, when I first rode up that long escalator in a uniform too big for myself. I wanted desperately to "fit in" or "blend in" to my new SOTA surroundings. I recall wanting to upgrade from my P6 SPI bag to a new colourful bag, nervous that it was not "artistic" enough. Even my shoes had to be carefully selected for my new surroundings. People of the city only wore the trendiest street shoes -- none of those ugly track shoes anymore. Well, whatever perceptions I had of SOTA were quickly debunked because, arriving in school, I saw that people actually did wear ugly track shoes. In fact, they wore whatever they wanted. Sneakers, track shoes, leather shoes, whatever. Many wore mismatched socks. Some wore mismatched shoes. Some went completely without shoes or socks at all -- for "convenience", as I later found out. So there I was, 12-year old me, happily on time for school, contemplating shoes.

Those shoes represented SOTA's first lesson to me -- dare to be different.

In fact, the shoes were not just a lesson in being different, they also taught me that what made someone a SOTA student wasn't something superficial like the way they dressed, or even how they carried themselves. I was to find out, only one thing truly sets a SOTA student apart -- passion. Every batch enters SOTA with so much diversity, texturing the student body with a million facets, much like a diamond. But diamonds need to be refined before they sparkle. The extra bits are cut away, till the core of everything -- a true, simple passion -- shines through. I saw this process in myself, and mirrored especially in all the dancers around me. In Year 1, we always had impeccable hair, fresh pink shoes, barely used. I remember seeing everyone being all smiles as we *willingly* stayed back in the studios after class ended, posing for the perfect instagram pictures, or learning new tricks to impress our friends with. By Year 3, we had begun to sport loose strands of hair, and blackening shoes with holes. Things were starting to get tough; teachers got stricter, the hours got longer, our grades got lower, and we got more tired. And Instagram likes couldn't distract us from those difficulties. After experiencing failure over and over, those of us who remained realised that we still love dance. No amount of disappointment, failed auditions, grade Cs on our report books, or instagram posts with fewer than 100 likes, could keep us away from it.

SOTA's second great lesson to me: passion isn't superficial. It's a real, stubborn, and irrational attraction to something, and it lies within.

Still, what lies within doesn't go very far, unless you project it outwards. I think SOTA students have a special something that radiates about them and becomes visible to all. By this, I'm not referring to the trademark rips, tears, and paint splatters on our shirts. I'm talking about the SOTA vibe, spirit, or whatever you want to call it. Throughout my years at SOTA, I was always in awe of the genuine kind-heartedness and people-centredness of my fellow schoolmates. We were always willing to lend a helping hand and a listening ear; we would give whatever we could to help others out -- yes, even if we truly were "starving artists" who had nothing much to give. SOTA students are tight-knit and have an intuitive understanding of one other, and it still saddens me slightly that I can only look back on those unique relationships I formed with like-minded individuals as a fraction of the past.

The SOTA spirit did not stop at being a solidarity based on common passions we shared. SOTA students have a myriad of other kinds of interests which they used to bring joy to the community around us. I'm sure I was not alone in feeling tremendously grateful for the privileges SOTA presented to me -- all SOTA students were invested in making a positive difference not just to the country we live in, but even to the global community at large. (We were desperate to prove that the precious taxpayer money spent on us could yield returns.) I recall fondly the environmental CAS projects that shamed irresponsible environment-killing plebeians. It was insane. I could no longer buy my Starbucks or weekly bubble tea without bringing my metal straw around. On many Thursdays, I saw students and teachers alike slowly realise that no stall would allow them to tapao food in styrofoam boxes. These trivial instances are something I now hold dear; they prove that the persistent belief of a few caring individuals could unite a school of 1200 students in making small, sacrifices for the greater good. We graduate as 18 year olds with dreams, hopes and the desire to make the world a better place; who's to say what changes we'll make to the world in a few years' time? It would be truly magical if all alumni kept this SOTA spirit with them, and I'm sure they will. (All the alumni, holler right now! [Pause] I hope they hollered, because I wouldn't know since this is a video-recorded speech.)

The Class of 2018 is known as the High School Musical batch because of our obsession with flash mobs. I've personally never watched High School Musical. Maybe I should now, if not some people might be out for blood. In any case, I thought it would be apt to share some lessons that can be learnt from flash mobs with everyone in the audience, especially my juniors.

1. Flash mobs are essentially great ideas that start from just one person. It only takes one person to make life a little bit more beautiful. Don't be afraid to be that first one to make a change.
2. The joy of flash mobs can only spread slowly outwards if more people join [in](#). During your life here at SOTA, grab every opportunity you can to have some spontaneous fun.
3. Finally, flash mobs can't last forever; they inevitably end with the music. All good things must come to an end... the Sota Class of 2018's journey ended last year, but all 160 of us are qualified to start our own flash mobs at any time. To my juniors, study hard, enjoy SOTA, and when the journey ends, you'll be primed to become stars in the real world out there.