

## ST Singaporean of the Year finalists show nothing can stand in the way of humanity: President Halimah



President Halimah Jacob with the finalists for The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year award. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

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PUBLISHED FEB 9, 2022, 5:45 PM SGT

**SINGAPORE -** The 10 finalists for The Straits Times Singaporean of the Year award come from all walks of life, but they share some common traits, said President Halimah Jacob.

They demonstrate strengths of character that are admirable, and underpin the kind of society we aspire to achieve, she said in a speech at the award ceremony at the UBS University on Wednesday (Feb 9).

"The ST Singaporean of the Year finalists challenge us to think and act beyond our ordinary capabilities. They make us feel uncomfortable to continue living in our comfort zones occupied with ourselves but to exceed even our own expectations," said Madam Halimah.

"In the current pandemic, when our everyday lives can appear rather gloomy and mundane, they lift our spirits and show that nothing can stand in the way of humanity."

She noted that although only one finalist will be named ST's Singaporean of the Year, all of them are worthy of respect.

"In a world where we are daily reminded of unsolved conflicts and untold sufferings, such acts of courage and kindness, and new ideas to build a more inclusive and sustainable society, are truly motivating."

Organised by ST and presented by UBS Singapore, the Singaporean of the Year award is given each year to a Singaporean individual or group that has made an impact in society.

This year, in its seventh edition, the award was presented to Mr Sakthibalan Balathandautham, who gave part of his liver to a baby he had never met before. He is now also an advocate for organ donation.

One of the finalists, Mr Azlee Abdul Shukor and Mr Johnson Chia, had come together to rescue a female driver trapped in her car after a horrific accident.

Madam Halimah noted that selfless acts like the ones by Mr Sakthibalan, Mr Azlee and Mr Chia exemplify the best of Singaporeans and our capacity to care for others, even those we do not know.

She also highlighted the different values of the other finalists in her speech, such as the grit and tenacity displayed by three Team Singapore athletes, Ms Joan Poh, Mr Loh Kean Yew and Ms Yip Pin Xiu, in their endeavour to represent the country on the international stage.

She said: "As a front-line nurse, Joan had put her Olympic training on hold to answer the call for medical reinforcements.

"Kean Yew's humility in victory struck a chord with many Singaporeans. Pin Xiu has been a champion in more ways than one - not just at the Paralympics but also in Parliament where she championed greater inclusivity in sports."

Madam Halimah also praised canteen stall operators Asanul Fariq Sani and Norhasyimah Awaludin for setting up a free grocery corner outside their Tampines home, as well as Ms Porsche Poh and her charity Silver Ribbon for working tirelessly to promote awareness of mental health and fight the stigma attached to it.

"Their contributions are especially pertinent during the pandemic, which has exacerbated some of the challenges faced by these groups."

Madam Halimah said the other three finalists also stayed true to the spirit of the award with their bold vision.

Mr Abdul Malik Hassan grew his father's nasi lemak business in lieu of his ambition of becoming a pilot and now mentors other hawkers to help them expand their business.

Mr John Cheng aspires to create sustainable solutions through food innovation, with the goal of feeding the global population, while Ms Lynn Wong quit her pursuit of a PhD in business studies to promote Chinese heritage, reaching out to youth through food and festivals.

Last year, the award was given to front-line fighters in the ongoing battle against Covid-19.

Although many appreciate the work they do, Madam Halimah noted that the number of healthcare workers in public institutions who have been abused or harassed was reported to have risen over the past four years.

She said: "We must show greater compassion towards those who are putting their own safety on the line to protect the rest of us.

"I hope that the uplifting stories of the finalists of this year's Singaporean of the Year award will reinforce the positive values that ought to define us as Singaporeans."

Madam Halimah added that it is understandable that some may feel a sense of fatigue or frustration, having lived with Covid-19 for two years and abiding by social restrictions, most recently during Chinese New Year.

"We must remember that we do not take these precautions only for our own sake. We do this to protect those around us, including our loved ones and those who are at risk, and to safeguard our healthcare capacity."

She noted that many other Singaporeans have also put others above self in their own ways.

Some of them, like healthcare workers, have been featured in the book In This Together: Singapore's Covid-19 Story, published by ST. Others contribute quietly by donating to Covid-19 relief initiatives, she said.

"We must continue to appeal to our sense of community and rise above negativity to tide through Omicron," she added.