

A COMMUNITY OF RESPECT: TRANSCRIPT OF DOORSTOP INTERVIEW BY PRESIDENT THIRMAN SHANMUGARATNAM AT THE LAUNCH OF PRESIDENT'S CHALLENGE 2025 ON 28 MAY 2025 AT KALLANG ACTIVESTG NETBALL CENTRE

We are off to a very good start with the refreshed President's Challenge.

We have made three main shifts.

Achieving Social Impact through Upliftment

The **first** shift takes place in the context of the much broader landscape of giving in Singapore that we've developed over the last twenty years, which is a good thing. More resources are going into a broad base of beneficiaries too.

It allows the President's Challenge to focus on achieving social impact. The President's Challenge will focus not just on needs, but on upliftment of individuals and achieving lasting social impact.

So that's the slant we're taking. **All the programmes we're supporting aim not just at meeting immediate needs, but uplifting people – by discovering talents and developing their potential.** That's the first shift, and it's a very deliberate shift that we're taking in the grants that we're making.

Second, we are expanding into the arts and sports as fields for discovering talent and upliftment, and I'll come back to that later. We still have many other ways, but **arts and sports are an important avenue for discovering talent and developing potential.**

Third, we are moving towards **sustained funding**, a new funding model. To achieve social impact, you've got to be at it for some time. We are giving awards of up to five years for some selected programmes, and up to three years for the others. So it's no longer year-by-year funding. And for a few of them, the grants are substantial, at a million dollars or more per year.

We have had to be quite discriminating. The happy problem we face is that we've had a lot more applications for this new President's Challenge. And **we could therefore afford to be very selective, choose programmes which we felt had the greatest potential, and yet cover a broad ground.**

Not all of them are well-established programmes. Some are just being piloted, or relatively new. Like the Netball Rising programme – a relatively new programme, but it has potential, and it deserves support.

So the sustained funding model of beneficiaries is extremely important in achieving social impact, and I'm glad that it is being matched by donors who are coming on board to provide sustained funding for the President's Challenge itself.

President's Challenge Fellowships

Fourth, we are launching the President's Challenge Fellowships. The essential idea is to broaden the canvas of leadership in society. **We want more catalysts and role models for social change**, and they will come from different walks of life.

We've launched three tracks within the President's Challenge Fellowships.

The first track – **Civic Action Fellowship** – will give persons who are engaged in the social sector the time and opportunity to reflect, do some research if necessary, and develop new ideas for social impact. It will be open to those in social work, youth work, social services more generally, and even active volunteers from other professions. SMU and SUSS will act as receptacles for their sabbaticals – not for academic study as such, but to network, develop their ideas and try them out by piloting new ideas on the ground. So that's an important first track.

The second track – **Springboard Fellowship** – aims to elevate people who are bouncing back from adversity as role models. I wanted them to be President's Challenge Fellows because they sent a signal to all of us. It's important for the person, but it's actually important for all of us to recognise that there are many paths in life, and they often involve a major setback or two along the way. We'll be selecting individuals who epitomise the determination to bounce back. We'll help them with education or training, and sometimes with getting started in a business.

The third track – **ITE Inspire Fellowship** – will recognise a significant group of Singaporeans who have come up through the technical education route and done especially well. Some may have graduated a few decades ago. We want those who have achieved success in their careers or in business to be role models. They too are catalysts for change. They will inspire new generations of students going through technical education.

Arts and Sports

Coming back to the question of the arts and sports. If you look at the grants that are being given to 60 programmes this year, quite a few involve the arts and sports as a means to uplift people – whether it's football-cum-mentoring, or equestrian activity, or riding for people with disabilities; or introducing the arts to people who don't normally have a chance to dabble in it, develop themselves or gain a deeper appreciation for the arts.

We're not swamping the grant programme with arts and sports, but there's spontaneity in this – several organisations have come forward with programmes that use the arts and sports to uplift people.

We still have a lot of talent waiting in the wings in Singapore – a lot of arts and sports talent that's waiting in the wings – and sometimes they come up just by chance, serendipity, and then they flower. And we've got to increase those chances for people to come up.

An example is Shruthi Nair, the dancer who's going to perform at the Singapore pavilion at the Osaka Expo this weekend. She got to be known because seven years ago, a video went viral of her and her friend dancing barefoot on the pavement at Campbell Lane, outside the Indian Heritage Centre. How did it all start? Shruthi was watching a Deepavali show at Bukit Batok CC as a little girl, and a performance mesmerised her – the expressions, the colours, the footwork. So, she dragged her mother to the CC office to immediately sign up for classes in Bharatanatyam, the Indian classical dance in the Carnatic tradition.

She was excited by it, but had she not been there at Bukit Batok Community Centre, it may not have happened. And she turned out to be a very good dancer who went on to School of the Arts, learnt a whole range of different dance forms – flamenco, Chinese, Malay, ballet. She went on to blend classical Bharatanatyam with hip hop and other contemporary dance moves – which is what she did seven years ago on the pavement, that led to over 11 million views.

The point I'm making is that **these talents may come up by chance, and you don't want these to be rare chances. We want to have as much outreach as possible to help people discover those talents.**

Apart from the programmes we are supporting through the grant call, President's Challenge is partnering NAC and SportSG to expand outreach and scholarships in the arts and sports. NAC scholarships at the diploma and degree level are being expanded for arts talents. And SportSG, through its new spexEducation Undergraduate

Scholarships will expand opportunities for our TeamSG athletes, both locally and, for some, study abroad.

Very importantly, we're broadening the base of sports outreach. First, for persons with disabilities – the Enabling Sports Fund is going to receive significant funding from President's Challenge so we can engage many young people with disabilities in the sports, and spot talents early too. And second, we will reach out to many more young people through the clubs and academies under ActiveSG, as well as interschool competitions. We really want many more involved in sports, because out of that we will surely get emerging talents.

A Community of Respect

The final question was to do with the ultimate objective of the President's Challenge.

We're really developing a community of respect. It's intangible. It's a culture. But we're at the stage of our development as a country where the intangibles matter more in our own lives, and in national life. And they even matter in our being able to achieve our tangible goals.

Developing that community of respect – where we respect everyone, not just respecting our differences, but respecting the effort, skill, and contribution that everyone brings – is what creates unity. But it's also more than that. It's actually one of the most powerful ways in which we uplift ourselves collectively.

It is how we motivate and uplift each other. Recognising the very different life circumstances that we each have, putting ourselves in someone else's shoes, realising the obstacles they face, encouraging and motivating them to overcome those obstacles, and developing friendships and relationships with one another that are respectful.

We uplift people not just through financial resources being put in the game, not just by opening up opportunities, but by helping them develop that intrinsic motivation to go further. And the respect we lend each other is the most powerful source of intrinsic motivation – knowing that you can do it. Everyone can do it. That's how we rise together.

So creating this community of respect – of respect for all – is actually a very powerful way in which we can uplift ourselves as a society and achieve goals that are very much more about what we can achieve collectively, rather than what each of us can achieve individually. That's the ultimate aim of the President's Challenge.