Blind PhD holder proof of meritocracy

By TOH YONG CHUAN

A BLIND Singaporean who overcame the odds to earn a doctorate made the Prime Minister choke up, when he cited her as an example of a successful citizen who is helping to build a “compassionate meritocracy”.

Research scientist Yeo Sze Ling lost her eyesight when she was four, but went on to forge an interest in mathematics and enrolled at the National University of Singapore. She topped the science faculty and graduated with three degrees, including a PhD.

PM Lee Hsien Loong, who has a double first-class honours degree in the subject from Cambridge University, said: “I stare at a page of maths with the formulas – I don’t understand what’s going on sometimes... But to be able to imagine it, visualise it, manipulate it, express it, that’s amazing.”

Dr Yeo is now working at the Agency for Science, Technology and Research and as an adjunct assistant professor at Nanyang Technological University. The winner of the National Youth Award last year also helps other handicapped people at the Society for the Physically Disabled.

PM Lee said she proves that one can do well with hard work.

“It doesn’t matter what your circumstances are, and that is what we have to try to do to contribute back to the society and keep the system fair for all.”

This will help build a “compassionate meritocracy”, a term used by Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong recently.

Making this point after announcing changes to the education system – which aim to keep pathways open to all – Mr Lee also said meritocracy “has to remain the most fundamental organising principle” here.

“We have to recognise people for their contributions and their effort, not for their backgrounds, not for their status or wealth or connections,” he said.

Communities can also do more to complement individual effort and government programmes.

He described how residents from a private estate in the east took charge and solved the problem of indiscriminate parking by drawing up a code of conduct. This included residents promising to park at least a car in their porch and not to reserve space outside.

“They saved on parking aunties, and maybe the other estates can learn something from them,” said Mr Lee, drawing chuckles from the audience.

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