

THE STRAITS TIMES SINGAPOREAN OF THE YEAR 2021

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Finalists for SOTY2021 (photos and citations)

Finalist 1: Abdul Malik Hassan



He grew his father's nasi lemak business from one single stall to more than 40 outlets islandwide. Now he's teaching other hawkers how to expand their business.

The eldest in a humble family, he had to fight big odds before getting his degree from NTU at 33. As a graduate, his big ambition of becoming a pilot finally seemed within reach. But after getting an interview with SQ, his father asked him to take over his nasi lemak stall. Reluctantly he did, but grew it from one stall in Adam Road to more than 40 Crave outlets islandwide. He started new concepts including Kaaakis and is mentoring hawkers, teaching them how to, among other things, do inventory and scale their business.

Finalist 2: Asanul Fariq Sani and his wife Norhasyimah Awaludin



The couple got emotional after seeing a single pack of instant noodles left in the kitchen of a family they visited. They now provide free groceries for the hungry right from their Tampines home daily.

Mr Asanul Fariq Sani and his wife Madam Norhasyimah Awaludin knew they had to do more to help the hungry after seeing a family who only had a packet of instant noodles in their kitchen. The couple decided to set up a free grocery corner right from the door of their Tampines home to give out free food to the less fortunate.

To date, they have spent over \$10,000 sustaining their project, feeding everyone who comes by with no questions asked. Members of the community have also stepped forward to donate to their corner after hearing about the initiative.

When Mr Fariq and his wife are busy at their canteen stall in the morning, their four sons step forward to take the lead of managing the corner - replenishing stocks and welcoming those who stop by until their parents are back. Madam Norhasyimah wishes for this project to teach her sons about the value of helping others.

Finalist 3: Azlee Abdul Shukor and Johnson Chia



They showed courage on Nov 2 when they stopped to help a driver whose car had crashed at a Seletar Expressway underpass and got her to safety just before the car burst into flames.

Johnson Chia Yong Lee was driving along the Seletar Expressway (SLE) when he saw a car skid and crash into the wall before coming to a stop. He stopped his car, jumped out and took to safety a 33-year old woman driver just before the car caught fire. Desperate for help, he tried flagging down a car. It was Azlee Abdul Shukor, driving a van, who stopped. They drove out of the tunnel where the car was burning, and waited for SCDF officers to arrive. The ambulance came in about five minutes and took the woman to Khoo Teck Puat Hospital. For their courage, they were awarded the SCDF Community Lifesaver Award on Nov 15.

FINALIST 4: John Cheng



Passionate about food innovation and sustainability, he is keen to support local food start-ups, providing them with resources to grow. He is also seeking sustainable solutions to feed the growing global population.

Mr John Cheng's passion for food innovation and sustainability as well as collaboration is clear in all he does. The 39-year-old has big dreams and is not afraid of the hard work needed to achieve them. As the chairman of Feed 9 Billion, an open innovation platform, he hopes to find sustainable solutions to feed the global population, which is expected to hit some nine billion in 2050.

He is also the founder of Innovate 360 at 9 Chin Bee Drive in Jurong. It is an accelerator for food start-ups – providing them with office space, kitchen and manufacturing facilities as well as opportunities for networking, mentoring and collaboration with other firms.

Since it began in 2018, more than 40 start-ups have joined. He is keen to help food start-ups grow and scale and, in particular, wants to help local brands take it a step further.

Finalist 5: Loh Kean Yew



He became the first Singaporean to win the Badminton World Federation World Championships on Dec 19, capping an excellent run in the last three months where he beat six out the world's top 10 players.

Loh Kean Yew first caught the eye when he beat Chinese legend Lin Dan in the Thailand Masters final in 2019. In a pandemic-hit year, he qualified for and competed at the Tokyo Olympics, but found his development stunted as high-level training and competition opportunities dried up locally.

Keen to make up for lost time, the 24-year-old embarked on a one-month training camp in Dubai with Denmark's Olympic champion Viktor Axelsen and four other top-60 players.

Loh then went on a tear, winning the Dutch Open and Hylo Open in Germany, and claimed the scalps of Axelsen, Denmark's world No. 3 Anders Antonsen and world No. 10 Rasmus Gemke, Japan's world No. 2 Kento Momota, Chinese Taipei's world No. 4 Chou Tien-chen and Malaysia's world No. 7 and All England champion Lee Zii Jia.

In December, against all odds, he became Singapore's first badminton world champion, and in just two months, slashed his world ranking from 41st to break into the top 20.

Finalist 6: Joan Poh



The rower successfully pursued her Olympic dream while balancing commitments as a staff nurse in Tan Tock Seng Hospital's renal department, taking several stretches of no-pay leave to train and compete abroad.

Joan Poh began working toward the Tokyo Olympics at the start of 2019. Struggling with limited funding, her Olympic dream was also challenging given she was juggling her job as a staff nurse in Tan Tock Seng Hospital. After taking stretches of no-pay leave to train and compete abroad, she returned to nursing at the start of the pandemic, pulling 10-hour shifts from April 2020 for almost a year. In May 2021, earned her spot in Tokyo at the last opportunity.

At the Olympics two months later, she finished 28th out of 32 athletes, a result which left her disappointed. But validation in the form of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong holding her up in his National Day Rally speech as an example of "the best of being Singaporean", helped her appreciate her journey better.

The oldest of three children said her difficult formative years were what compelled her to strive for the Olympics, and also what makes her want to become a role model for at-risk youth and aspiring Singaporean athletes.

Finalist 7: Porsche Poh and Silver Ribbon



Ms Porsche Poh, and the charity she co-founded Silver Ribbon (Singapore), laboured to fight the stigma against mental illness way before mental health issues became a national concern today.

When Ms Porsche Poh, 50, started Silver Ribbon (Singapore) in 2006 to fight the stigma against mental illness, she was told she was “crazy” for wanting to tackle the issue.

This was way before mental health issues became a national concern.

But while working at the Institute of Mental Health, she saw first-hand how the stigma was stopping people from seeking help. Ms Poh went round begging for funds in the early days to get Silver Ribbon off the ground. Today, the charity provides free counselling, raises awareness of mental health conditions and has advocated for various issues relating to mental health. Her efforts appear to have paid off. The number of people seeking counselling has doubled last year with the Covid-19 pandemic. She said: “People are struggling with feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and uncertainty.”

FINALIST 8: Sakthibalan Balathandautham



He donated part of his liver to a baby he had never met after coming across a plea on social media. After a successful recovery, he is now an advocate for organ donation.

While checking his Instagram messages in July 2020, sales executive Sakthibalan Balathandautham came across a plea by a young couple looking for a liver donor for their 1-year-old daughter, Rheyra. Born in July 2019, Rheyra developed persistent jaundice soon after birth and was diagnosed with biliary atresia, a rare disease in infants where the bile ducts in the liver are inflamed, blocking bile flow to the gallbladder. The condition can eventually lead to liver failure.

Mr Sakthibalan passed the donor suitability test, and underwent reviews and assessments before an interview with an ethics committee before donating 23 per cent of his liver to Rheyra in Sept last year. After a successful recovery, he forged a strong bond with the toddler and her family, and is now an advocate for organ donation, encouraging more people to step up and help patients in need.

FINALIST 9: Lynn Wong



She quit her pursuit of a PhD in business studies to become a defender of Chinese heritage and culture. She is involved in multiple Chinese clan associations, and is a distinguished martial artist.

At 32, Ms Lynn Wong's youth is a rarity in Chinese clan association circles, but that has not stopped her from investing much of her time and energy in the promotion of Chinese heritage and culture. She gave up her PhD in business studies five years ago and today is involved in multiple Chinese clan associations, including in five as a committee member, and is also a skilled lion dancer and martial arts practitioner.

In particular, she feels strongly about getting young Singaporeans to not neglect their Chinese history and identity, reaching out to them variously through foods and interesting festivals, such as the Ho Yeah festival she organised in 2018. She is also working on a book on the Qixi festival, more popularly known as Chinese Valentine's Day, which she hopes can be rejuvenated here as an arts festival that can give Chinatown a much needed boost in footfall.

Finalist 10: Yip Pin Xiu



The swimmer, who suffers from a progressive nerve condition, won two Paralympic golds this year. She is not just a force in the water but also a champion for inclusivity.

Yip Pin Xiu, the swimmer, will be 30 years old in January, has a progressive nerve condition called Charcot-Marie Tooth but 13 years after her first Paralympics remains a force in the water.

In Tokyo, at her fourth Paralympics, the soft-spoken, steely champion won two gold medals to add to her previous haul of three golds and a silver.

Ms Yip, who sees herself as representing not just athletes but people with disabilities, women and young people, also quietly argued for inclusivity this year.

Olympic athletes receive \$1 million for winning a gold medal but Paralympic athletes received \$200,000. When asked about it, Ms Yip pointed out the inequality. She stirred an interesting public debate and the amount was raised to \$400,000.

Recognition had come and while Ms Yip was grateful she hoped that over the years the gap that still exists with the Olympians will continue to lessen.