

Get Out Of Comfort Zone

The Straits Times Forum Online Story (April 8, 2010)

I WOULD like to thank Ms Sandra Leong for her excellent commentary last Saturday, 'Scoring high in grades but not in values', on an issue that is brought up consistently yet conveniently ignored.

Having graduated from Hwa Chong Institution - both high school and college - I echo her sentiments, particularly in terms of the prevalent intellectual snobbery and the 'bubble-wrapped existence' many of my juniors and counterparts dwell in.

My greatest gripe with the current situation is that students treat the school as some form of sanctuary: a haven insulated from the plethora of challenges that face the on-the-ground Singaporean. Such an observation is worrying because while they are elevated up the socio-economic ladder, their vision is clouded by their personal pursuits and pressures to be the *creme de la creme* within their cohort. Competition is stiff.

The entire high school struggle is viewed as an extended preparation for applications to colleges and scholarship boards, so as to jumpstart careers and hence continue to outclass the rest.

Can we count on these elites - many potential politicians and leaders in various spheres - to enact responsible, well-intentioned policies and plans for the people?

Many see community service and grassroots activities as platforms for students to interact and comprehend aspects of Singapore they were previously blind to. When I began my stints with Heartware Network and Children-At-Risk Empowerment (Care) Association, I was not only uncomfortable and awkward when working with my peers from very different backgrounds, but also cognisant of the pragmatic considerations involved: to boost my curriculum vitae, to look good on applications.

Those feelings of snobbery and elitism - elements Ms Leong highlighted - can never be unwrapped by the school or society; rather, the individual has to constantly reflect - which I eventually ashamedly yet proudly did - and remind himself of his duties and responsibilities to his family, his country, and perhaps even the world.

Of course, it would be unfair to generalise about the general population and label students as a whole, because there are individuals who have passionately and genuinely rendered their services within and outside the school.

Most admirably, many of my friends who came from less than privileged backgrounds or who faced considerable financial constraints were never short-changed in terms of opportunities and commitments, and many excelled in an assortment of areas. These are the true merits of Singapore's meritocracy, where students are given the chance - with bursaries and deserved financial assistance - to progress despite their humble beginnings.

We cannot afford to allow elements of elitism to blind us to what truly matters - encouraging privileged students and professionals to step out of their comfort zone, contribute and ultimately make a difference in Singapore.