

**SPEECH BY MR ALVIN TAN, MINISTER OF STATE, MINISTRY OF TRADE AND
INDUSTRY & MINISTRY OF CULTURE, COMMUNITY & YOUTH, AT THE SERVICE
GOLD AWARDS 2021, 5 NOVEMBER 2021, 2PM, AT ORCHARD HOTEL**

Ms Junie Foo, Chairperson of the Singapore Kindness Movement,

Dr William Wan, General Secretary of the Singapore Kindness Movement,

Ms Kwee Wei-Lin, President of the Singapore Hotel Association,

Distinguished guests, Ladies & Gentlemen

1. A very good afternoon to everyone who has joined us here today. I am honoured to be here today at the 2021 Service Gold Awards, where we recognize staff in the hotel industry who have displayed exemplary service and gracious behaviour during their course of work.

Challenges to the hotel industry due to COVID-19

2. 2021 has been a difficult year for the hospitality and tourism sectors. Compared to 2019, visitor arrivals have declined by more than 90% and the Average Occupancy Rate for hotels has dipped significantly as well. While we are pressing on with efforts to gradually reopen Singapore's borders, international travel is unlikely to rebound quickly in the next few years.

3. Despite the challenges brought about by the pandemic, the hotel sector has shown remarkable resilience by adapting and transforming itself to leverage new opportunities. For instance, several hotels have used the lull period to conduct infrastructure upgrades, such as installing self-check-in technology that is integrated with the E-Visitor Authentication, or EVA [*pronounced as "E-VA"*] system. This is an STB-developed software which will enable faster guest verification and allow participating hotels to provide a seamless and contactless check-in experience for customers, while improving productivity. Some hotels have also embarked on cross-sector collaborations in an effort to diversify revenue streams. For example, Grand Hyatt partnered with activewear brand Kydra to leverage the strong demand for wellness, and curated a highly successful wellness retreat for guests looking for experiences beyond the traditional stay in hotels.

4. The industry was also one of the first to step forward to support our national efforts in stopping the spread of the virus, by transforming themselves into Government Quarantine Facilities or SHN-designated facilities, and cooperating with our agencies to fine-tune their control measures along the way. Hotel employees have had to undergo stringent training and adhere to strict healthcare protocols to ensure the safety and security of their guests. On top of that, they had to maintain quality hospitality standards so that guests, while isolated, would still feel comfortable and less anxious during their stay. For this, we are very grateful.

Recognising Those Who Lead by Example

5. Our hotel staff have truly risen to the occasion, demonstrating immense strength and professionalism in another year of the pandemic. Despite having to take on new and unfamiliar responsibilities under short notice, our awardees today have exhibited unequivocal commitment to service excellence with bravery and kindness. I would like to highlight three stories in particular that exemplify this.

6. First, I would like to share the story of Sajida Nasareen, an Administrative Assistant from Rendezvous Hotel Singapore. Described as a warm, motherly figure within her department, Sajida has

built a family-like atmosphere for her team, many of whom have been away from their families for the past two years, by bringing delicacies for her team members to enjoy.

7. Sajida's kindness extends beyond her teammates as well, to the way she engages with guests. One example of this happened in April, when Sajida assisted the Front Office with the check-in of an elderly Punjabi couple, Mr., and Mrs. Arora, who were here to visit their son and had to serve their Stay Home Notice for two weeks. To ensure that the couple was well and comfortable during their isolation, Sajida would make daily calls to check in on them, even while she was off duty. Being fluent in Punjabi, Sajida also learnt that both Mr. and Mrs. Arora were vegetarians, and took the initiative to liaise with the caterers on their dietary needs and other requests.

8. Further, when Mrs. Arora mentioned to Sajida that she was homesick and missed the food from her hometown, Sajida prepared some homemade chapatti with lentil dhal curry and aloo ghoobi for the couple in her personal time. Mrs. Arora was extremely touched by Sajida's kind gesture.

9. Another awardee is Myra Balagtas, a room attendant of 11 years at Fairmont Singapore, who befriended a 71-year-old regular guest, who usually stays for at least four months at a time. As this guest travels alone and uses crutches to help her walk, Myra would always look out for her and assist her from her room to the lobby. While the guest would be resting at the lobby, Myra would ensure that she was always covered with a blanket, which has prompted her to call Myra her guardian angel.

10. Finally, I would like to highlight the story of Sabrina Lee, an Assistant Marketing and Communications Manager at the Holiday Inn Express Singapore in Clarke Quay. Although Sabrina plays a critical role in managing marketing and communications, she is always ready to lend a helping hand to other hotel departments. As the hotel is currently used as an SDF, Sabrina has helped her fellow colleagues by taking on other responsibilities of supporting hotel operations and covering office shifts, on top of her usual work. Her resilience and versatility during this challenging time demonstrate her commitment and dedication to deliver service excellence through every interaction.

11. All these examples remind us that kindness is not only fundamental to the growth of our society, but also important in building a cohesive Singapore as we tackle the challenges of the pandemic together. Small acts of kindness can make a huge difference to someone whose life or livelihood may have been upended as a result of the surrounding uncertainty and volatility. I hope everyone here continues to exemplify kindness and compassion, not only in their work, but also beyond the industry, so that we can create a ripple effect and build a nation full of gracious and kind individuals.

The New and Adaptive Tourism Landscape

12. Given the central role that hotel staff play in the industry, it is only fair that as the tourism landscape continues to adapt and evolve to become more resilient and sustainable, staff are given ample opportunity to upgrade and upskill themselves. There will be many opportunities for staff to continue upskilling in a variety of both front and back-end functions, which will present staff with a multitude of career paths within the hospitality industry and beyond. For example, the SkillsFuture Study Awards defrays out of pocket expenses for early to mid-career professionals committed to developing their skills through relevant courses. Hotels may also tap on existing support schemes such as STB's Training Industry Professional in Tourism scheme, which supports employee upgrading and talent and leadership development. This will allow hotel staff to adapt to unexpected changes quickly and easily.

13. Hotels have also begun to embrace technological innovation to equip staff with in-demand skills, to give them a competitive edge while boosting their employability when travel regains momentum. For example, with the adoption of digital concierge chatbots, concierge staff are being trained to manage such technology and update the chatbots with frequently asked questions. As guests are able to find information through the chatbots instead of approaching concierge staff, this has also helped hotel staff work more efficiently, giving productivity a much-needed boost.

Conclusion

15. I would like to offer my heartfelt gratitude to everyone in the hotel industry for your hard work and perseverance in the past year, and for continuing to demonstrate impeccable service and devotion to the needs of those around them. Lastly, I would like to congratulate the award recipients once again for being the embodiment of kindness. I hope your kind acts of service will serve as examples that inspire many of your colleagues to delight their guests in the same way.

16. Thank you.