$10,000 to keep a memory alive

BY SANDRA DAVIE
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AFTER his friend from university perished in the Dec 26 tsunami, lawyer Nicholas Song searched for a way to keep her memory alive.

Ms Edlyn Yap, 32, had been part of the National University of Singapore’s (NUS) law class of 1996. She died when the killer waves hit Sri Lanka, where she was holidaying.

Mr Song, 34, who works for an international law firm in China, was thinking about her when he remembered something from his days at the New York University Law School where he got his master’s degree.

A bench in a courtyard there was named after John F. Kennedy Jr, son of the late American president and an alumnus. He was 38 when he died in a plane crash in 1999.

Mr Song: “I’d been moved by the friendship that inspired such a gift. I thought a similar gift of a bench to the NUS Law faculty would be a simple but meaningful tribute to Edlyn.”

“It would remind us of the many happy times that our classmates, including Edlyn, spent on those benches in the foyer. It was where we ate lunch, hung out, even studied. It would warm our hearts to see it flourishing,” said Mr Song.

NUS will soon fix a plaque on a bench at its law faculty, from the class of 1996 remembering one of their own. Ms Yap’s classmates are raising $10,000 for that dedication.

At the three universities here, the fund-raising buzzwords are “naming opportunities” — giving donors naming rights for buildings, or even benches.

The bench plaque is new at NUS. But chief fund raiser Chew Kheng Chuan says endless naming potential all over campus.

“We are looking at everything — from tutorial rooms to hostel rooms, laboratories, benches and even chairs in lecture theatres which could have been someone’s favourite spot,” he said.

Growing endowment funds by giving naming rights to donors is something American universities have done for a long time.

In Singapore, up to the 1950s, the predecessors of NUS — the University of Singapore, University of Malaya and Raffles College — named buildings after major benefactors.

Buildings on the old Bukit Timah campus, now used by the Singapore Management University (SMU), bear the names of men like Manasseh Meyer, a Jewish property developer, or the late sugar king Oei Tiong Ham.

But that practice stopped in the decades that followed. Philanthropists still gave to higher education, but on a smaller scale and mainly to set up chairs for professorships and scholarships.

It was revived more recently at the Government’s prompting. In 1997, based on the recommendations of a consultant from Boston University, the joint NUS and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) endowment fund was split into two, so that the two universities could plan their own strategies to grow their funds. The Government promised to match the donations.

All three universities now have teams to sound out potential donors, network with alumni members and organise events to tug at the purse strings. NUS was the first to cross the $1 billion mark, while NTU has raised $700 million so far, and SMU, $300 million.

But those sums pale against Harvard University’s US$23 billion, the biggest endowment fund among American universities. The Americans have a long tradition of tapping alumni, the community and big corporations for donations.

With the stepped-up fund raising here has come new names on Singapore university blocks.

SMU, which started building its new city campus four years ago, has already found donors for two buildings — the Li Ka Shing Library and the Lee Kong Chian School of Business.

At NUS, retired banker Tan Chia Tuan will have a wing of the new administrative centre named after him after he donated $29 million last month. The other wing will bear the name of the late rubber tycoon Lee Kong Chian, whose Lee Foundation gave $30 million.

Of the $30 million, $10 million went to the new NUS nursing school, which was named after his late wife, Alice Lee.

The NUS medical faculty has been named after the late Dr Yong Loo Lin, virtually unknown to most people here until his foundation gave $100 million — the biggest donation ever to a tertiary institution here by a private donor.

He was a medical graduate from the University of Hong Kong who became a successful businessman there. He was also an uncle of Chief Justice Yong Pung How.

Previously, the same foundation had given $25 million to NUS for its music school, which was renamed the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, after one of Dr Yong’s two daughters. The late Miss Yong had been a music teacher.

Not everyone is thrilled with the new names.

Questioning the decision to name the medical faculty after Dr Yong, an NUS student said: “He did not distinguish himself in medicine, it looks like you can get your name up on a school just by forking out millions of dollars.”

NUS fund raiser Mr Chew is not surprised by that sentiment. There were similar murmurings when the music school was renamed.

His response: “Why not recognise someone who gave so generously to further education? It is a noble act that deserves recognition.”

Harvard-trained Mr Chew adds that while Harvard University is instantly recognisable today, it was named after a little-known clergyman who donated a small library of books 367 years ago.

At NTU, fund raiser Mari
na Tan Harper said it was all so the lookout for what it could offer donors by way of public recognition.

She said: “For some, putting their name on a building is ‘too loud’. They would rather put their name to scholarships or their favourite corner in the library.

“We are even open to naming areas in the sprawling Jurong campus that are special to students. Many students met their husbands or wives on campus.”

It’s the same over at SMU, where chief fund raiser Robert Schlesinger sees great potential at the new Bras Basah campus.

For some Singaporeans, like businessman Terence Tan, 44, such naming opportunities are appealing.

He has fond memories of a park along Bras Basah Road that he and his wife used to frequent when they were dating.

“I would love to have our names on a spot there, or a tree,” he said.