Rewarding enterprise

The Rolex Awards for Enterprise encourage and endorse the advancement of knowledge and well-being, as MATTHEW PHAN finds out

Established in 1976, the Rolex Awards for Enterprise are aimed at giving support to individuals who advance human knowledge and well-being. The categories of the awards span five major areas of recognition — science and medicine, technology and innovation, exploration and discovery, the environment and cultural heritage — “though these are broadly interpreted to include almost any undertaking, from a technological breakthrough to a journey of discovery or a simple solution to a long-standing problem”, Rolex says.

Every two years, five Laureates are selected from a global pool of applicants, with each receiving US$100,000 in cash to further their projects, as well as a gold Rolex chronometer. Up to an additional five Associate Laureates are also picked to receive US$50,000 and a steel-and-gold Rolex chronometer.

The financial award is usually vital funding needed to implement or complete the projects, though the worldwide publicity generated is regularly cited as the biggest benefit to candidates in the long run, says Rolex.

Past winners include Michel Andre, who invented a system to identify the sounds emitted by whales and use them to avoid collisions with passing ships; and Mohammed Bah Abba, who modified traditional pottery to create storage vessels for food in Africa. Other Laureates are Rafael Guarga, who invented a device to reduce the devastation of fruit harvests by frost; Anita Stude, who started a reforestation programme in the Brazilian Amazon; and Lionel Dupug, who aimed to trek across the Arctic in a bid to raise awareness on global warming.

“Only a handful of projects have not been completed and these mostly for logistical reasons, such as areas that became too dangerous for the Laureates to continue their work,” says Rebecca Irvin, director of the Rolex Awards.

A total of 1,664 entries from 117 countries were submitted for the 2006 Rolex Awards. The oldest applicant was 97 years old, and the youngest 15 years old, with the average applicant age at 47 years old. The proportion of female applicants rose slightly to 22 per cent, from 20 per cent in 2004. The US had the largest number of candidates at 224, followed by Germany with 102, Argentina with 99, Italy with 93, India with 82, France with 75, Australia with 54, the UK with 53, Switzerland with 46, the Philippines with 43, Brazil with 40 and Nigeria with 34.

However, this year has seen a 66 per cent increase in applicants from logistical reasons, such as areas that became too dangerous for the Laureates to continue their work,” says Rebecca Irvin, director of the Rolex Awards.

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However, this year has seen a 66 per cent increase in applicants from South-east Asia, to 85 entries. Singapore accounted for 18 applicants this year, up 50 per cent from two years ago, while Malaysia had 21 entries, Indonesia 22 and Thailand 14. Projects from Singapore tend to have a strong technological element, Ms Irvin says. Several projects were Singapore-based, though others sought to bring environmental, economic or educational benefits to neighbouring South-east Asian countries. One sought to develop new ways to grow vegetables, while another proposed to regenerate mangrove systems.

“There are many Asians who are involved in innovative projects, but their work is often left undiscovered. Our efforts to raise awareness in Asia are paying off,” she says.

People in an area are often spurred to apply after someone from the country has already won, especially in developing countries, Ms Irvin also says. For example, many more applications were received from Nigeria and Argentina, after Mohammed Bah Abba and Teresa Manera were named Laureates in 2000 and 2004 respectively.

To date, the Awards have received some 23,300 applications. The youngest person to have won an award was 28 years old, and the oldest 74. The Rolex Awards were initiated by the late Andre J Heiniger, former chairman of Rolex, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the company’s greatest technical achievement, the waterproof Oyster chronometer.

The Rolex Awards for Enterprise will be held at the Esplanade Concert Hall in Singapore. That’s right — the concert hall — which will be transformed to seat the 400 guests expected to attend.

He President S R Nathan and his wife will be in attendance, as well as eminent business and institutional leaders in the region. Patrick Heiniger, Rolex chief executive and chairman of the Selection Committee, is hosting the evening, along with Claudio Mariani, managing director of Rolex South-east Asia and India.

Celebrated Indian film-maker Mira Nair — responsible for popular films such as Monsoon Wedding — will act as Master of Ceremonies, and Singapore ambassador-at-large Prof Tommy Koh will also be introducing the Selection Committee.

The ceremony is by invitation only, though Rolex will hold a symposium “Fostering an Invincible Spirit” the following night, which is open to the public.

This discussion, held in conjunction with The Business Times, Singapore Management University and Channel NewsAsia, will take place from 3pm to 7pm at the Drama Centre at the National Library, and features eight scientists and explorers who have previously served on past Rolex Awards Selection Committees. Registration is free and goes live today at www.smu.edu.sg/rolexforum.