Making a difference without the grandstanding

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A SINGLE defining act by an individual has helped shed some light on the kind of society we can be, and should prompt us to think more deeply about the direction we ought to be heading in.

It's an act that, I hope, will get talked about more extensively because I think that few of us would have had the inclination to do what he did.

If we are looking for characters who we can point to as people who broke conventions, then he's one of them. And I hope that his act creates more of a buzz in schools, kopitiams and the Internet. I hope, too, that it generates waves of support.

And having appeared in the newspaper can only serve to enhance not his reputation as such, but the gesture that he made.

It will, I hope, also serve to prick the conscience of the rest of us and cause us to wonder why we haven't taken the steps that he did.

If indeed it also prompts a response from the authorities, or the specific agencies concerned, well so much the better.

The more we can generate discussion on this, the better.

Anything that adds to our collective consciousness, that causes us to examine our values as a society, that results in introspection, can only lead to a better outcome.

It is an example of how an individual — whether you are someone of means or not, or whether you are known or not — can spark some soul-searching and, in the end, take our society forward.

No, this is not a reference to blogger Ngiam Tong Dow, who already have their 15 minutes of fame.

Darren Lim, 24.

His decision to start a scholarship named after his parents — that pays part of the tuition for an accountancy student every year indefinitely — is an outstanding gesture which deserves attention.

It was uplifting and outstanding because it was unexpected from someone who's young and who, by his own account, started out being average.

But he looks to be someone who has been brought up with the right values, and who has taken it upon himself to contribute a little something to his fellow citizens.

He is doing so to honour his parents and what they have taught him, his alumni, and to provide an opportunity for someone who may otherwise not be in a position to see himself through university.

Darren's gesture has been to provide a practical solution, even if it will only serve to benefit one individual at a time. But it can have a broader impact if others in his generation, singly or collectively, choose to do something similar, multiplying the effect of what he started.

It will also have a broader and useful impact if it serves to prompt others in the generations before him to do something.

It need not be to set up a scholarship. It can be in being less tight-fisted with donating to causes or when students come up to you on flag-day; it can be by giving away that stored-away computer with the slower processor to a welfare home; or volunteering time with an association or group when you can.

Active citizenship and wanting to contribute, even if you desire to change society, has many pathways.

Some have, no doubt, chosen to use their fame to focus attention on issues.

That remains a legitimate pathway, with its own set of traffic rules, road humps, fast lanes, detours and stop signs. And let's not forget that like all societies, there's always a traffic cop on duty some way down the road.

There are other paths. Like when residents trek across an open field for a more straight route to their housing estate from the bus stop instead of using the designated walkway 70m away.

Eventually, and I think we've seen this happen, the authorities come to realise that the path which the residents have carved is the more convenient one and they pave it.

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Yet he has shown that there are other practical pathways in which individuals can cause and effect real change in someone else's life, without the need to generate bluster and become involved in elaborate political theatre or debate.

His actions have reinforced my belief that there are Singaporeans out there who have practical, unusual and alternative approaches to addressing some of the pressing issues which their fellow Singaporeans face, and who are trying to make a difference, but minus the grandstanding.

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