NUS awards pay tribute to Mrs Lee

Six needy law students, two top postgraduates are first beneficiaries

By Matthias Chew

MONEY is tight at home, so to help pay for her law studies, Ms Mak Shin Yi gives private tuition.

But now, the 21-year-old daughter of a cabbby and a warehouse assistant is breathing easier.

She has been given an $8,000 bursary that covers the bulk of the $9,000 in tuition fees she pays each year for her law course at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Her parents had emptied their savings account to pay for her first year and “we were going to borrow money from our extended family” for the following years, she told The Straits Times yesterday.

The second-year undergraduate was among six needy law students the NUS picked to be the first recipients of the Kwa Geok Choo Bursary, named in honour of the late wife of former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew.

The bursary is one of two awards the NUS has introduced in the name of Madam Kwa, who died in October 2010.

It was conceived as a tribute to her legacy as a top conveyancing lawyer, and as the wife of one prime minister and the mother of another. She had co-founded leading law firm Lee & Lee in 1955.

The other award is a $17,000 scholarship for the most outstanding students applying to do the postgraduate law programme at NUS.

Two were given and one went to Ms Constance Lee, 23, who did law at Oxford University in Britain. She said: “I was planning to borrow money from my parents, so this definitely helps.”

Donations for the awards came from individuals, corporations and law firms.

Madam Kwa’s son, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, is among the donors who have collectively pledged $5.6 million. The Government will match the donations with a further $5.1 million.

The money will support two other NUS initiatives in Madam Kwa’s name: a full-time professorship in property law and a programme in which distinguished experts are invited to teach law courses.

The donors were honoured last night at an appreciation dinner. President Tony Tan Keng Yam and PM Lee were among the guests.

Explaining the awards, NUS law dean Simon Chesterman said the bursary was introduced to commemorate Madam Kwa’s legacy: “Madam Kwa stands for the idea that deserving students should not be limited in their achievements by financial circumstance.”

For Ms Mak, it means pursuing her passion for human rights causes and advocacy.

She is eyeing an internship at a human rights organisation or a United Nations agency next year when she goes to Spain on an exchange programme.

“A law school education is not enough to teach one where to begin to work for the alleviation of poverty, which is why I’m very keen on going out there to get a sense of how organisations like Action Against Hunger operate,” she said.

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