



PHOTO: TAN SUAN ANN

ALL SMILES NOW: Dr Anamah Tan (left), Active Senior Citizen of the Year, is a well-known women's rights champion who now sits on a United Nations committee on women's rights. Madam Lee, Grandparent of the Year, is a drinks-stall operator from Boon Lay who brought up her children and grandchildren despite great hardships after being widowed at the age of 29.

Two grannies who made a winning difference

NTUC FairPrice honours this year's grandparent and active senior citizen

By RADHA BASU

LIFE has dealt her many blows, but 84-year-old Madam Mary Lee has always fought back with spirit, clinging to the belief that selflessness and hard work are never in vain.

Last night proved that she is right.

As three generations of her family tearily looked on, the humble drinks-stall operator from Boon Lay was declared NTUC FairPrice's Grandparent of the Year at a dinner event at the Raffles Town Club.

Wiping away a tear or two of her own, but undaunted by the glare of TV cameras and chasing reporters, she said simply: "I am happy — it's the happiest moment of my life."

The grandmother of 13 —

and great grandmother of four — beat more than 300 other nominees to win the accolade.

After a massive publicity drive, the final decision was left to the nearly 32,000 Singaporeans who cast their votes.

Even as Madam Lee received her award from Mrs Yu-Foo Yee Shoon, Minister of State (Community Development, Youth and Sports), two of her grandchildren — Ms Kaini Low, 20, and Ms Linda Lim, 31 — went on stage to crown her with a little tiara and wand.

To them, she was clearly a fairy grandmother, who always put her family first.

When her youngest son fell prey to a debilitating illness and a daughter went through a difficult divorce, Madam Lee took their five kids — including Ms Low and Ms Lim — under her wing.

Toiling at hawker centres for the past 28 years, she helped raise money to ensure that they were not denied a good tertiary education. She still works 11

hours a day at her drinks stall.

"I think education is very important," said the diminutive silver-haired matriarch. "And I did not want to deny these children a chance at a good life."

Did she want anything from her grandchildren in return?

"I just want them to remember their Ah Ma," she said.

Not surprisingly, some of the \$10,000 prize money will go towards helping others. Madam Lee will donate part of it to an old folks' home and some to pay for the medical expenses of a son who is a stroke patient. The rest she plans to put towards a visit to China, where her late husband was born.

Madam Lee was widowed at 29 in pre-independence Singapore. She faced an uphill task raising four children in a male-dominated society, juggling several jobs as a rubber-plantation worker, seamstress and washerwoman.

Said Ms Low: "Throughout her life, she has always put our needs before others."

"I nominated her, thinking if she won, it would be a great birthday gift."

Madam Lee turned 84 on Oct 30.

Sharing the stage with Madam Lee was well-known women's rights champion Anamah Tan, 64, who was declared NTUC FairPrice Active Senior Citizen of the Year.

"This award is a wonderful surprise — I did not really consider myself a senior citizen," joked the lawyer, who now sits on a United Nations committee on women's rights. She plans to donate her \$10,000 prize to crime prevention and women's rights groups.

"If you have passion in you, it keeps you young," said Dr Tan, a grandmother of two who has no plans to retire anytime soon.

Neither does Madam Lee.

Asked if the excitement of winning would keep her awake at night, she replied: "Of course not. Unless I sleep, how will I wake up at 4am tomorrow to start work?"