Tributes pour in for ex-NIE director Lee Sing Kong

Horticulturist, who played key role in greening of Singapore, dies at 65

Ng Huiwen

A passionate educator and respected academic, he also helped clothe Singapore in a swathe of green.

Late on Friday night, horticulturist and former National Institute of Education (NIE) director Lee Sing Kong died of a suspected heart attack. He was 65.

“He was a wonderful friend and it is a great loss. He was very bright, full of creativity and eager to push for new ideas,” said Professor Leo Tan, a marine biologist who was Prof Lee’s predecessor at NIE.

Prof Lee was also known for developing aeroponic technology, where plants are grown suspended in air. His ground-breaking research allowed temperate vegetables to be grown in the tropics.

“Having started in horticulture and it underlined all aspects of his whole life.”

These included Prof Lee’s time as NIE director from 2006 to 2014, he pointed out.

“He had created sustainable agriculture, despite the lack of land and water. So no matter what he was asked to do, he always had an unconventional way of thinking. He always encouraged teachers not to think of limitations, but opportunities,” Prof Tan added.

Prof Lee, a Nanyang Technological University (NTU) vice-president, played a leading role in the greening of Singapore, said NTU in a statement yesterday.

His contributions to developing the country’s national parks and greenery helped to realise the late founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s vision of a Garden City, it said.

During his time as NIE director, Singapore scored international successes in the global Programme for International Student Assessment rankings in mathematics, science and reading.

After stepping down from NIE, he was appointed NTU’s vice-president for education strategies. He became vice-president of alumni and advancement in August 2015.

Over the years, as an educator, he developed NTU’s innovations in curricula, teaching methods and assessment. These included establishing NTU’s Centre for Research and Development in Learning, which moved NTU into research for higher education learning.

For his many contributions to Singapore’s education system, Prof Lee received the prestigious Public Administration Medal (Gold) in 2011. He had received the Public Administration Medal (Silver) in 2004. He also made his mark internationally as the first Singaporean to receive the Medal for Distinguished Service in 2013 – the highest honour bestowed by the Teachers College in Columbia University.

NTU president Bertil Andersson, who expressed his condolences on behalf of the university, said: “Prof Lee was an inspiring figure who left an indelible mark on Singapore’s teaching and higher education.”

Prof Lee leaves behind his wife, two children and two grandchildren. His wake will be held at his Tiong Poh Avenue home from today to tomorrow. He will be cremated on Tuesday morning.

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THINKING OUT THE BOX

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PROFESSOR LEO TAN, a marine biologist, on former NIE director Lee Sing Kong (above)