How do you feel being on the National Day 2002 Honours List?
I received the news when I was in Vietnam. It was a pleasant surprise because it was neither an expectation nor an objective. I have been a volunteer in community service with various organizations for nearly 30 years. I believe in living my life in a way that makes a significant difference to others' as more important than the awards and honours that I have received for the choice. Awards and medals do not make the person.

What motivates you towards community service?
Stewardship. With education came a growing sense of being entrusted with a responsibility for others, especially the less able and weaker in society. I believe the better educated who have received much from society should make conscious efforts to help others in the community. The guiding principles in life are: when you've learnt, you teach...and when you have received, you give. A meaningful life is measured by impact and not assets; it is not defined by the acquisition of wealth, but by one's contributions towards the well-being of others and community impact. A greater sense of happiness will obtain from the realization that we can only multiply what we have by sharing and giving.

Do you think community service is "everyone's cup of tea?"
I think many people approach life with a self-centred and materialistic focus. It is always about what one could get more than others out of one's effort. The major guiding principle for most seems to be "What's in it for me?". People should learn and recognize the fact that good communities and societies are built by a synergy of individual efforts led by 'servant' leaders, and never by the self-defeating 'each-man-for-himself' rule. I suggest one should also learn to get off himself quickly, so as to be able to see the many social needs and community challenges where we could make a real difference and create meaningful impact.

Do you mean that community service should be an integral curriculum in the education process?
Most certainly. Yes. According to the great American education reformer, Abraham Flexner, who founded the Lincoln School in New York in 1917, an educated person will prefer to study in order to serve real purposes instead of merely acquiring traditional knowledge. A thinking person will want a curriculum the content, spirit and outcome of which is realistic and genuine, not formal or traditional. Thus, the truly educated modern person is one trained to know, to care about and to understand the world he lives in, both the physical world and the social world. He will develop a firm grasp of the physical world, meaning he has the capacity to note and to interpret phenomena; as well as a firm grasp of the social world for a better comprehension of and sympathy with current industry, current science, and current politics. As a result, he would reach out consciously to establish organic relationships with his communities, to engage the opportunities to confront broad social issues with a view to influence the government and social regeneration of his community and nation. This is what learning for impact means.

Did your sense of social responsibility take you to Vietnam?
In the beginning, I was completely unfamiliar with Vietnam. When I was here, I developed an intense liking for the friendly, strong-willed and passionate Vietnamese who have great pride in their culture and history. I think I may be able to make a tiny, infinitesimal impact on the lives of some of the 80 million people over the next few years. Indeed, I am humbled by the opportunities - I felt privileged and honoured to be able to extend my contributions beyond our shores, and hopefully make some friends for Singapore, too.

Tell us about your Viet Nam mission for the International Labour Organisation (ILO).
I was appointed the ILO International Consultant to advise the Government of Viet Nam on the implementation of a national tripartite consultative framework for social dialogue at the enterprise, local and national levels. This framework is expected to play a crucial integral part in Viet Nam's transition towards a market economy. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) generously funded the mission. When I was there, I also learnt that the ILO, a United Nations agency, had been searching for a suitable consultant over the previous eight months. It gave me a profound sense of tremendous achievement and personal satisfaction.

What is the nature of your consulting work in Viet Nam?
From 5-16 August 2002, I was in the Vietnamese capital city of Ha Noi, and the provincial Ho Chi Minh City in the South. Together with the ILO Specialist from Bangkok, we conducted workshops and meetings with senior officials from government, trade unions and employers' organizations to facilitate the formulation of concrete action steps for a tripartite consultative framework for the operation of Viet Nam's new Labour Code (passed in April 2002) aimed at producing a sustainable peaceful and harmonious industrial relations climate with social justice. I was also asked to comment on a draft Decree on Tripartite Consultation, which has since incorporated some of the comments and presented before the Vietnamese Cabinet for final consideration. I also joined discussions with the Vice Minister responsible for the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs.

Would you be returning to Vietnam in the near future for further consulting work?
Yes. This was a successful ILO mission, and which has also paved the way for the rollout of a US$2 million ILO project designed to promote sound industrial relations and to strengthen the capacities of industrial relations actors in Viet Nam over the next 3 years. I had also made further recommendations that had been accepted as part of the new Project. I will be participating in the high-level planning meeting in November 2002 to help detail and elaborate on the timeline and project activities. I am excited by the tremendous potential impact to be created by the new Project that will benefit Vietnamese society in many tangible ways. They will facilitate Viet Nam's growing economy and build her human capabilities for industrialization programs.

What would be the overall impact from your involvement in Vietnam?
In October 2002, the World Bank has decided to integrate the new ILO Project with its overall work in Vietnam. The ILO Project has now become a part of the World Bank's Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS) in Vietnam. The CPRGS is a 10-year US$370 million multi-agency total initiative aimed at education, health, job creation and infrastructural development. It is truly tenfold... to be a part of the whole solution for a nation of 80 million people is just a wonderful privilege.