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**MEDIA RELEASE**

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## **‘Helen Keller of Southeast Asia’ to be inducted to Singapore Women’s Hall of Fame**

***Six other outstanding women also to be honoured***

**8 March 2017** – Dubbed the ‘Helen Keller of Southeast Asia’, Theresa Chan Poh Lin won the hearts of many in the 1960s and 1970s with her cheerful optimism and determination to not be handicapped by her deafness and blindness.

She was almost illiterate when, as a teenager, she got the chance to go to the School for the Blind in Singapore. Theresa rapidly learnt Braille and fingerspelling, and did so well that she was admitted to the Perkins School in the United States. When she returned to Singapore she became a teacher at the School for the Blind.

Theresa’s progress was followed closely by many during the 1960s and 1970s, with considerable media coverage both in Singapore and abroad. She was the subject of a 1964 radio documentary and a critically acclaimed movie in 2005. Interviewed shortly before she died in 2016, she said: “I hope people will remember me, and remember that whatever their disabilities, they should have hope and not be unhappy and discouraged.”

Theresa’s inspiring story will now be captured for posterity in the Singapore Women’s Hall of Fame. On 24<sup>th</sup> March, she will be among the seven women to be honoured at the 4<sup>th</sup> Singapore Women’s Hall of Fame (SWHF) gala dinner and induction ceremony.

The other six women are:

- Wedding gown designer and entrepreneur Sylvia Kho
- Animal rights activist Marjorie Doggett
- Broadcast media pioneers Wong-Lee Siok Tin and Aisha Akbar
- Entertainers Anita Sarawak and Rahimah Rahim.

They will join the 133 women already in the Hall of Fame. The SWHF was launched by the Singapore Council of Women’s Organisations in 2014 to recognise and celebrate the achievements and contributions of women in Singapore. A key aim is to share their stories so as to inspire others, especially young Singaporeans, to dare to dream and to chart their own path.

In his foreword in the 2017 SWHF book, Professor Tommy Koh, chair of the Selection Committee, says: “We are sometimes asked if there is a danger we will run out of candidates for consideration. My answer is an emphatic no. Many women have played, are now playing, and will in the future

continue to play, vital roles in Singapore's progress and development. There will never be a shortage of inspiring women for induction to the Hall of Fame."

At the gala dinner on 24<sup>th</sup> March at the Shangri-La Hotel, SCWO patron Mrs Mary Tan will present each of the seven women, or their representative, with *The Flame*, a trophy that symbolises the vitality of the women in the Hall of Fame and the torch of inspiration that is passed from one generation to another.

Guests at the event will include Hall of Famers, women parliamentarians, foreign diplomats, senior civil servants, and representatives of SCWO's member organisations. The SWHF gala dinner and induction ceremony is held every March to mark International Women's Day.

Short profiles of the seven women and some key facts about the SWHF are attached.

#### **About SCWO**

The Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) is the national coordinating body of women's organisations in Singapore. Our 58 member organisations represent more than 600,000 women in Singapore. Incorporated in March 1980, the SCWO serves to bring together the various organisations, clubs, committees, groups and women leaders, with the goal of creating a national movement. It seeks to promote the ideals of "Equal Space, Equal Voice and Equal Worth" for women in Singapore.

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## The Singapore Women's Hall of Fame Honourees of 2017

**SYLVIA KHO**

*Pioneering bridal gown designer and entrepreneur*

**Born 1917**

**Died 2013**

It was a dressmaking hobby that, after World War II, became a small home-based enterprise. By the 1970s Sylvia Kho was the doyenne of Singapore's bridal business with four boutiques across the island. She designed the most exquisite wedding gowns and made them with luxurious laces from Europe. Born in 1917 to Peranakan parents in Selangor, Malaysia, Sylvia learnt sewing and beadwork from her mother. After attending Methodist Girls School in Singapore, she became a nurse. Just before the Japanese occupation, she joined her fiancé Kho Hock Chiao in Indonesia. Back in Singapore in 1946, she began making dresses and then focussed on wedding gowns. As her business grew, she travelled to Europe and the United States, attending courses in makeup, hairdressing and flower making and sourcing laces and other supplies. She opened her first boutique at Outram Park Shopping Complex in the 1960s, and three in the 1970s. During peak periods, she designed 40 to 50 wedding gowns a month. She always cut the gowns herself. While her clients were mostly well-heeled, including royalty from neighbouring countries, Sylvia saw a need for more affordable weddings and started renting gowns to brides. She closed her business in 1993 when she was 76, but continued to make the occasional gown for customers who sought her out right up until she was 90. She died in 2013 aged 96.

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## The Singapore Women's Hall of Fame Honourees of 2017

### MARJORIE DOGGETT

*Champion of animal rights*

**Born 1921**

**Died 2010**

She once disguised herself as a laboratory technician so she could find out how animals were being used for research in laboratories. Marjorie Doggett spent her entire adult life fighting for the rights of animals. Born in 1921 in Sussex, England, Marjorie grew up surrounded by animals on her grandfather's farm. Her activism began when, aged 16, she attended a talk on vivisection and she realised just how much animals suffered at the hands of humans. She moved to Singapore in 1947 with her husband, Victor Doggett, who was posted here by the Royal Air Force. They became Singapore citizens in 1960. Marjorie soon noticed the plight of stray animals and, together with another lady, she began rescuing cats. This was the beginning of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). She campaigned ceaselessly, writing many letters to the press over the years on a whole range of animal welfare issues. Marjorie was also a talented photographer. In her first decade in Singapore she photographed many Singapore buildings and in 1957 her book *Characters of Life: A guide to the buildings of Singapore* was published by Donald Moore. Many of the buildings have since been demolished. Marjorie died in 2010 aged 89.

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## The Singapore Women's Hall of Fame Honourees of 2017

**AISHA AKBAR**

***Music teacher, broadcaster, songwriter, author***

**Born 1930**

**Died 2015**

A generation of schoolchildren grew up listening to her radio programmes and singing the songs she wrote. Aisha Akbar was a music teacher who in the 1950s became a presenter of children's radio programmes. She took to this with gusto, not just presenting programmes but also writing or localising songs such as 'The Satay Man' and 'The Ting Ting Man' which were published in a series of books entitled 'Malaya Sings'. In the 1960s, fearing that traditional Malay folk songs would be lost in time, she spent three years researching the lyrics and tunes of favourites such as 'Rasa Sayang'. This resulted in the book *'Thirty-six best loved songs of Malaysia and Singapore'*. Leaving Radio Singapore in 1971, Aisha moved to England where she taught music at a prestigious school, wrote stories for the popular BBC children's TV series Jackanory, was involved in various choirs, and ran a property business. In later life, she developed a strong interest in painting and jewellery making, and volunteered at an ethnic centre where she spent time with the elderly who were lonely and could not speak much English. Aisha died in 2015 aged 84.



## The Singapore Women's Hall of Fame Honourees of 2017

### **WONG-LEE SIOK TIN**

*Standard setter for Singapore's broadcast journalists*

**Born 1938**

**Died 1993**

Wong-Lee Siok Tin devoted her life to broadcasting. Joining the Ministry of Culture's Department of Broadcasting as a programme assistant in 1961, she became in 1978 the first woman to head the department. Her excellent command of English and her attention to detail set the tone for independent Singapore's early generation of broadcast journalists. After graduating with an honours degree in English from the University of Singapore, Siok Tin was briefly a teacher before she made broadcasting her career. An early assignment was to cover Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's first trip to London to negotiate Singapore's independence and merger with Malaya. She impressed Mr Lee with her ability to capture succinctly in her daily reports the key points of the talks, and her understanding of the role of the media in nation-building. She subsequently accompanied him on many of his official trips. When the broadcasting department became the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation in 1980, Siok Tin was first its deputy general manager and then general manager. Audiences were increasingly wanting more from their radio and TV stations. Siok Tin understood this. As much as possible, she gave her staff the leeway to experiment, particularly the Current Affairs team that produced some excellent documentaries. In 1991, when she was 53, Siok Tin retired when she was diagnosed with cancer. She died in 1993.



## The Singapore Women's Hall of Fame Honourees of 2017

**THERESA CHAN POH LIN**

*The Helen Keller of Southeast Asia*

**Born 1943**

**Died 2016**



Theresa Chan Poh Lin lost first her hearing and then her sight to meningitis when she was in her early teens. When her parents, a hawker and a waiter, were at work she sat by herself in the tiny cubicle that was the family's home in Sago Lane, Chinatown. Life offered nothing but darkness and despair. Then a social worker referred her to the Singapore School for the Blind. Theresa rapidly learnt Braille and fingerspelling, and she read the autobiography of famed American deaf-blind author and activist Helen Keller. In 1960 Theresa was admitted to the Perkins School for the Blind in the United States. She excelled at mathematics and took part in many sports. Theresa spent 13 years in the US, and visited many other countries during that time. In 1973 she returned to Singapore and, until 1990, was a teacher at the School for the Blind. In 2005 Theresa starred in Singapore film-maker Eric Khoo's movie, *Be with Me*, which was based on her life. In April 2016, she was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer but refused treatment. She told *The Straits Times*: "I hope people will remember me, and remember that whatever their disabilities, they should have hope and not be unhappy and discouraged." Theresa died in June 2016, a month before her 73rd birthday.

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## The Singapore Women's Hall of Fame Honourees of 2017

### **ANITA SARAWAK**

*Entertainer extraordinaire*

**Born 1952**

She's been described as a singing cyclone, a consummate entertainer, and Singapore's singing ambassador. A household name in Singapore when she was barely out of her teens, Anita Sarawak was one of the first Asian performers to make it in the United States. She was born in 1952 into show business. Her father was the actor, director and producer S Roomai Nor and her mother the actress Siput Sarawak. Anita appeared in her first film when she was 14. But it was singing that was her forte. Her first professional gig was at a Chinese restaurant where she sang Mandarin and Chinese-dialect songs. She went on to perform at top venues such as the Neptune Theatre Restaurant and Singapore Hilton Hotel, drawing capacity crowds with her sultry vocals, energetic dancing, and engaging stage banter. In 1985, when a Las Vegas nightclub offered her a contract, she jumped at the chance to chart a career in the United States. She performed in Las Vegas for 18 years, with her talent, drive and professionalism securing her a long-running contract with Caesar's Palace. Returning to Singapore and Malaysia in the early 2000s, she turned to television, appearing in variety and comedy programmes and hosting talk shows. In 2013 she returned to Las Vegas where she has kept a low profile.

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## The Singapore Women's Hall of Fame Honourees of 2017

### **RAHIMAH RAHIM**

*Singapore's first lady of song*

**Born 1955**

Rahimah Rahim was born to sing and perform. Her father, Rahim Hamid, was a film editor and singer who in the 1950s was known as the Nat King Cole of Singapore. Her mother was the actress Mariam Baharom. An uncle was the singer and actor Ahmad Daud. Rahimah was just six when she appeared in the 1961 film *Korban Kasih* (Love Sacrifice). Other film roles followed and she also sang on several variety shows. When she was about 14 she began to sing with her father at nightclubs. In 1972 her first extended play, *Mana Ibu Mu*, was released. Her big break came in 1974 when she took part in the Kimi Koso Talentime in Tokyo, Japan. She beat more than 100 singers from across Asia to the top prize, which included a three-year recording contract with Warner Music. Releasing back to back hits such as *Gadis Dan Bunga* and *Bebas*, Rahimah became a household name. But in 1989 she decided to retire and spend more time with her young daughter. In 2003 she was persuaded to make a partial return and began accepting singing and acting engagements. In 2010, Rahimah appeared in Dick Lee's musical, *Fried Rice Paradise*. In 2015 she played the part of a 'summon aunty' (parking warden) in Royston Tan's movie, *3688*.

