Blind scientist wins top youth award

By MELISSA PANG

AS a child, Dr Yeo Sze Ling worried constantly about her future, and the type of work she would end up in – the 34-year-old lost her sight to glaucoma at the age of four.

She decided not to let her blindness stand in her way. In university, she earned a scholarship to pursue a PhD. Using Chinese Braille, she also helped a student become the nation's first blind person to pass the Chinese O- and A-level examinations.

For all her achievements and contributions, Dr Yeo has been awarded the Singapore Youth Award this year, the highest national accolade for youth.

She was one of the three awardees unveiled at a press conference held at the National Youth Council in Toa Payoh yesterday.

The two other winners are paralympic sailor Jovin Tan, 25, and youth mentor Aaron Maniam, 32.

They will receive their awards from Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the Istana on Sunday.

In previous years, winners were picked from categories such as community development and youth services, science and technology, arts and culture, sports, and entrepreneurship.

This year's awards, however, recognised well-rounded youth who have not only excelled in their professions, but who are committed to community work.

Mr Edward Alec D'Silva, the chairman of the award panel, said the quality of the nominees has been increasing over the years. A total of 75 nominations were received this year.

"It's a positive sign as we see our youth aspiring to higher levels," said Mr D'Silva.

He added that the categories were removed because young people today were contributing to society in more ways than one.

Dr Yeo, a research scientist at the Agency for Science, Technology and Research, also teaches graduate students at the Nanyang Technological University.

In her free time, she volunteers at the Society for the Physically Disabled to help members use technology in daily life.

"Society seems to perceive handicaps as having a big limitation," said Dr Yeo. "I hope this award will inspire and encourage other youth who have their own setbacks or shortcomings, to show that with the right support, belief, and perseverance, we can carve a way for ourselves."

Mr Tan, who was born with cerebral palsy and is a three-time paralympian, will be representing Singapore in the Paralympics in London this year.

Mr Maniam, a director at the Civil Service College's Institute of Policy Development, was recognised for his participation in youth leadership initiatives.

The Indian Muslim is actively involved in the Singapore Indian Development Association and Mendaki Club, where he mentors young ethnic minority leaders.

melisa@sph.com.sg