NUS, SMU to honour late Mrs Lee

By Rachel Chang

SINGAPORE’S two law schools have announced plans to pay tribute to the late Madam Kwa Geok Choo, wife of former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, in the form of scholarships, bursaries and awards in her name.

The Singapore Management University (SMU) will also name its law library, to be completed by 2014 in the space formerly occupied by the red-brick National Library, after Madam Kwa.

The National University of Singapore (NUS) will also create a professorship of property law in her name, a three-year position to be bestowed from this academic year, which starts next month.

Madam Kwa, who died last October after a series of strokes, was a successful conveyancing lawyer who co-founded the law firm Lee & Lee.

Started in 1955 with her husband and brother Dennis, it grew into one of Singapore’s leading law firms.

The Straits Times understands that both universities had hatched plans to pay tribute to Madam Kwa separately, but decided to announce them jointly when each got wind of the other’s plans.

Both universities say that they are still in the midst of fund raising for the various tributes, which they plan to continue indefinitely.

The organisations which have already made pledges towards NUS’ tributes include Ngie Ann Kongsi, law firms Drew & Napier and Rajah & Tann, as well as companies such as Keppel Corporation, Sembcorp and Singapore Press Holdings.

SMU declined to reveal its donors, noting that it would thank them collectively after the fund raising is completed.

The Straits Times understands that the Lee family is not involved with fund-raising for these tributes.

In a statement issued by both universities, Ms Kwa Kim Li, now managing partner of Lee & Lee and Madam Kwa’s niece, said that the family was “deeply touched” by the tributes.

“Madam Kwa, despite seeming a modest political spouse, was a noted legal mind. At Cambridge University, where both she and Mr Lee completed their undergraduate degrees, she was the first Asian woman to graduate with first-class honours in law.

“The leadership at both universities yesterday noted their desire to recognise a woman who was publicity-shy despite being the matriarch of Singapore’s most famous family.

SMU chairman Ho Kwon Ping said it was without doubt that Madam Kwa played a key role in the Singapore story. But she was always not accorded the recognition she deserved because of her low profile she chose to keep.

Describing her as “striving for excellence with humility and perseverance”, he said that these were the qualities worthy of emulation by SMU students.

SMU, whose undergraduate law programme began in 2007, will see its first batch of law students graduate this year.

NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan said that the bursaries to go to financially disadvantaged students in her name would be “a reflection of Madam Kwa’s long-standing concern that no deserving student should be deprived of a good legal education because of financial need”.

Through the tributes, NUS hoped to keep Madam Kwa’s memory alive, he said.

The university counts her as one of their alumnae as she had attended Raffles College, a precursor to modern-day NUS.

Her memory would inspire young lawyers to “contribute to the legal fraternity and society at large”, Prof Tan added.