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 Headline: Siblings do ex-offender mum proud with bursary awards
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Iscos Bursary Award recipients Christel Phouthavong, 16, and Bentley, 14, with their mother, Ms Calisa Cheong, 48. The awards are an initiative of the Yellow Ribbon Fund-Iscos Fairy Godparent Programme for supporting children of current and former offenders from low-income backgrounds. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

Siblings do ex-offender mum proud with bursary awards

Jose Hong

Sixteen-year-old Christel Phouthavong had a childhood tougher than most people.

Her Laotian father walked out on the family in 2007 and two years later, her mother was jailed for five years for cheating.

But yesterday, she and her younger brother, Bentley, 14, showed they could rise above their setbacks and do well enough in school to receive bursary awards.

Each received \$350 from the Industrial and Services Cooperative

Society (Iscos), a non-profit organisation. They were among 133 students given bursaries totalling almost \$40,000 in a ceremony at the MDIS Auditorium in Stirling Road.

The awards are an initiative of the Yellow Ribbon Fund-Iscos Fairy Godparent Programme for supporting children of current and former offenders from low-income backgrounds.

The bursaries range from \$200 to \$500, depending on the student's level in school. It also gives book grants to those who show good progress in their studies.

Christel, who scored the top

marks of six points in her N levels while studying at St Anthony's Canossian Secondary School, said she would keep \$150 for shopping and give the rest to her mother. Bentley, who will be in Secondary 3 at Assumption English School next year, said he would keep \$100 and give the balance to his mother.

Their mother, Ms Calisa Cheong, 48, who has two more children, is a part-time waitress and cleaner, and earns about \$1,000 a month. Christel, reflecting on her achievement, said: "My mum has no money, so this is my way of giving her something she can be proud of."

This year, the first four recipients of the Tan Ean Kiam-Yellow Ribbon Fund-Iscos Bursary Award will have their polytechnic or Institute of Technical Education studies fully paid for.

Mr Amrin Amin, Parliamentary Secretary at the Home Affairs and Health ministries, urged the students to pay it forward. He said: "Remember the opportunities that you have been given today, and consider how you can give back to society, to help those who are in need and less fortunate than yourselves."

A proud Ms Cheong said: "I am so happy for Christel because I've got nothing to give her. This bursary helps to reward her."

She added: "It is like water in the desert. The vouchers help my children to buy stationery, while I save the cash for their food and other expenses."

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By Jose Hong

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