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Heritage Trunks programme gets seniors to unpack their memories



Madam Tay Ah Lay (left), 83, and Madam Tay Yeok Leng (right), 83, getting their make-up done with the help of St Luke staff member Anita Conriana (left) and volunteer Aslinda Jambari. Some of the make-up used are from the Heritage Trunks. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

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Joy Pang Minle (mailto:joyp@sph.com.sg)

SINGAPORE - In his younger days, Mr Chia Wang Chong would dab a bit of Florida Water cologne - a cheaper alternative to French perfumes - on his neck before going out after a hard day of menial work.

For Mr Chia, now 71, the familiar sight of the Florida Water label brings back warm recollections of its fragrance and his drinking sessions with his buddies.

He was a participant in the Heritage Trunks programme, where themed trunks containing authentic objects from the 1950s to 1980s - gathered from various antique shops - were curated and distributed to elders in order to stimulate conversations and encourage reminiscence.

The first series of trunks featured a collection of objects related to three themes: Dressing Up, Lifestyle and Entertainment, and Everyday Living.

The programme was launched on Monday (May 6) by the National Heritage Board (NHB) in collaboration with St Luke's Eldercare Centre (SLEC).

Six excited seniors from St Luke's ElderCare Ayer Rajah Centre opened up the Dressing Up trunk which contained nine items such as a tin of Johnson's Talcum powder, a white handbag, a cosmetics case, and a bottle of Mr Chia's favourite Florida Water cologne.

The seniors took turns looking through the objects, accompanied by a volunteer who asked questions about each object, prompting them to share memories associated with the items.

"A lot of young people don't know what kind of life we lived back then. Now there is an opportunity for them to hear all the ah gong, ah mah stories," said Mr Chia.

SLEC chief operating officer Lester Leong said: "We do a lot of reminiscence therapy with our elders, and this programme will really help to unlock (their) memories."

He added: "Almost 50 per cent of our elders have dementia, and the hope is that seeing these familiar objects will encourage them, especially the quieter ones, to share more on their rich life experiences."

Mr Alvin Tan, deputy chief executive (policy and community) of NHB, said: "We hope to reuse and repurpose objects from the past as memory triggers and conversation starters, and to reposition our institutions as more than just 'collectors of objects', but rather as curators of content that can contribute to the well-being of an ageing society."

Twelve Heritage Trunks - four of each theme - will be available for loan at no cost to various healthcare and social services organisations from July this year.

Feedback from SLEC staff and seniors will contribute to the making of the future series of trunks.

The opening of the Dressing Up trunk on Monday was complemented by a make-up session by volunteer stylists, who primped the delighted seniors.

"I almost don't recognise myself!" said Madam Goh Ger Eng, 87. She told The Straits Times that she never had the time to dress up when she was younger because she was busy cooking and taking care of her six children.

"I never imagined this would happen, because I'm already so old," she said while gently touching her freshly styled hair. "I feel like I'm about to get married."

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