

Imprinting old memories onto fabric of life, and art

Nafa student inspired by time spent with two seniors with dementia to create art piece

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In her quest to create an artistic piece that explores dementia, 20-year-old visual artist Choo Jen Quinn spent nine months visiting two seniors with the condition.

Siak Choon, 85, who has severe dementia, would relive his younger days as a musician in Hong Kong, where he played the piano and trumpet in restaurants and theatres, and accompanied Cantonese singers at concerts.

"In the midst of our conversations, he would abruptly pause and get lost in another world. He would then start humming and moving his hands as though he was conducting a piece of music," said Ms Choo, a final-year student at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Nafa).

Gwek Siang, 83, who was diagnosed with dementia last year, told Ms Choo that she used to enjoy sewing and fashioning cushions and pillowcases from her old dresses, before she stopped sewing 20 years ago.

During one of her visits, Ms Choo took out the senior's old sewing machine so she could sew again.

Determined to sew the perfect seam, Gwek Siang unstitched the cloth six times and ran it through the sewing machine until the stitches were straight and tight, said Ms Choo.

After interacting with the seniors – whose real names have been changed to protect their privacy – she chose to preserve their memories and other aspects of dementia in an abstract art installation built with panels of white chiffon fabric.

Supported by Thye Hua Kwan (THK) Moral Charities, the National Youth Council and SG Cares, her art installation, Piece Of Mind, was unveiled at The Plaza in the National Library Building on Thursday.

Both seniors are beneficiaries of THK Crest, a mental health safety net programme that also serves seniors diagnosed with dementia.

Photos of Gwek Siang sewing and Siak Choon playing the keyboard were printed on the white fabric.

Ms Choo also digitally drew a pair of wrinkled hands to pay tribute to Siak Choon's musical past.

"I wanted to focus on his hands because he used them to play the instruments and show his passion. It was his hands that were most important and I felt that this was my representation of him."

To depict memory loss, which is a main symptom of dementia, Ms Choo printed layers of words and mahjong tiles that fade away as the art extends to the top of the fabric.

The installation is designed like a maze for viewers to walk into and find the sketches and photos. A number of fabric panels were left blank on purpose by the artist.

The installation will be displayed at The Plaza until April 28. Ms Choo is working with the National Library Board to display the installation at 10 libraries islandwide.

THK is also hoping to showcase the installation at partnering venues, which include shopping malls and schools.

Piece Of Mind could also feature at the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth's bicentennial celebration in August.

Ms Choo will remember the intimacy of her conversations with the two seniors.

For instance, Gwek Siang grew so comfortable with Ms Choo over the months that she started to reveal her cheeky side. She once showed Ms Choo a photo of a man from the 1950s and asked her and her grandson to guess who the man was.

After a few wrong guesses, Gwek Siang laughed and revealed that it was a photo of her cross-dressing.

"When she shared that cross-dressing memory, there was so much joy that exuded from her. To see her grandson seeing her old photos for the first time and being surprised by that photo made her laugh harder."

THK Crest @ Beo Crescent's senior centre director Felicia Wong

said: "Through the use of the translucent fabric and the fading words and mahjong tiles, it gives a foggy effect, similar to losing one's cognition. At the same time, Jen vividly portrays the seniors' memories through photos of him playing the keyboard and her old pictures.

"To them, those memories are the essence of their identities and how they lived their younger days."

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Visual artist Choo Jen Quinn next to her art installation, Piece Of Mind, at The Plaza in the National Library Building, in Victoria Street. The installation, which is supported by Thye Hua Kwan Moral Charities, the National Youth Council and SG Cares, will be displayed there until April 28. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE