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Giving Your Past a Present

The Gift of Remembering

“If I had just passed these people on the streets, I would probably just brush past them without ever knowing the depth of the lives they have had and the stories they could tell.”

Ruth was sharing her experience interviewing residents of the soon-to-be-relocated Rochor Centre. They were recounting how they continue to have communal dinners with their neighbours – a demonstration of the *bona fide* kampong spirit that some find so elusive in today’s Singapore.

Ruth is a student from the Victoria Junior College and part of the Memory Corps – volunteers of the Singapore Memory Project. She and I were interviewed by a major news agency on our thoughts about the identity of Singapore and Singaporeans.

Through Ruth and many other fresh-eyed volunteers who have participated in the Singapore Memory Project, we have come to realise that the power of memories lies in them not being solitary pursuits. Rather, memories and especially the stories that enliven them when shared, generate conversations that otherwise would not have happened. In the case of Ruth and many youth volunteers who documented the stories of older Singaporeans, many of whom can recount but are not as adept in writing them down, these dialogues help connect both generations through vivid narratives.

The Singapore Memory Project is a whole-of-nation initiative that aims to collect 5 million memories of Singapore by 2015. Since it was highlighted by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the National Day Rally in August 2011, we have begun in earnest to experiment with myriad channels to collect those memories.

Experiences shared by Ruth are a humbling reminder of their enduring value to the project team, which is to bring back the magic of conversations, to bond Singaporeans through shared experiences – and ultimately to achieve the ideals of nation building.

What was also very illuminating from Ruth’s experience is that she was drawn into an era before her time, one that her generation would find almost alien.

Capturing memories to pass on to those not of one’s time is akin to “giving the past a present” – the tagline of the Singapore Memory Project. One of the most powerful gifts that can be given to a nation’s future is the memory of how she was built. The people of Singapore have a perfect opportunity to present this gift to present and future generations of Singaporeans as those who witnessed Singapore’s nation-building journey are still around for us to capture their first hand experiences.

Some of the most moving memories received so far are those documenting loving accounts of parents’ and grandparents’ lives. A particular gentleman detailed his parents’ 50-year old love story that reads almost like a parallel history of Singapore.

This generation of Singaporeans will pass on, so it is the opportunity now for Ruth and others to construct a memory of Singapore through the eyes of its people.

Gene Tan

Director, Singapore Memory Project