



Ms Elaine Cheong, president of the Friends of the Museums and the first Singaporean to lead the group, has a message for those with time to spare to train to be docents: "Come and tell your Singapore story. It belongs to you." -- ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

BY LEONG WENG KAM SENIOR WRITER

When Ms Elaine Cheong joined the Friends of the Museums (FOM) in 1998, she was one of only five Singaporean women in a batch of 80 new volunteers.

The others attending a nine-month-long training programme to become museum guides were mostly wives of expatriates from different parts of the world.

"It was a culture shock for me to find in my own country that the majority in the group were expatriate women," recalled Ms Cheong, 63, who is married to Manpower Minister Lim Swee Say.

She became a volunteer docent while being a full-time mother of two young children, aged 10 and seven, at the time.

"I wanted to know more about Singapore's history, culture and heritage and to share that with others," said Ms Cheong, who had studied and worked in London and New York, and felt that her knowledge of Singapore was inadequate when people asked her questions.

Today, she is among the more senior of FOM's 600 volunteer docents. Two years ago, she was elected president and became the first Singaporean to lead the group in its 37-year history. With 1,600 members, it is the oldest and biggest of the museum docent groups here.

She said she accepted the post because she agreed with several expatriate members, who told her it was about time a Singaporean took charge. "And I hope I won't be the last," she added.

More Singaporeans have stepped forward in recent years, though they still make up only a minority of no more than 30 per cent of the volunteer docents.

They accounted for less than 10 per cent when she joined.

"Now, we have Singaporeans who have put their careers on hold to look after their families, entrepreneurs whose hours are flexible, retired teachers, lawyers, accountants and those from other professions," she said. She is on a campaign to recruit more Singaporeans, including seniors, to be volunteer guides at the National Museum of Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore Art Museum, Peranakan Museum, Malay Heritage Centre, Indian Heritage Centre, Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, Singapore Tyler Print Institute and Gillman Barracks.

Her message to those with time to spare during weekdays to train to be docents is this: "Come and tell your Singapore story. It belongs to you."

She said that after nearly two decades of showing visitors around the museums, she is proud of Singapore's past as well as its culture and heritage.

She volunteers mainly at the National Museum of Singapore, and her pet topic and area of expertise is Singapore's history. More recently, she has also been telling visitors about Singapore art.

Volunteer docents have to be adults, undergo training and then volunteer for at least a year with one of the museums.

"A good docent is one who knows the subject well through research and reading, but more than that, is also able to engage the audience and connect them to what they see."

Ms Cheong attended St Anthony's Convent and National Junior College before studying computer science at the University of Coventry in England. She returned to work for the computer firm, ICL, and married Mr Lim in 1981 after they met through a friend.

When Mr Lim, former managing director of the Economic Development Board, was posted to its New York office in 1991, she quit her job and accompanied him there with their two children.

While in New York, she did a part-time course in fashion merchandising and when the family returned to Singapore two years later, she started a children's wear business with a former colleague.

She said: "When I was overseas, people used to ask me where I came from and I was conscious then that I didn't know as much about my own country's culture and history as I should, and so decided to learn more when I returned home."

She became a docent after leaving her business.

Now, the FOM and its docents are reaching out beyond the walls of the museums to the community, and working on projects such as heritage tours with agencies like the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

"Service to the museums and the community will always remain our mission," she added.

FOM is conducting a recruitment drive for museum guides at the National Museum of Singapore's Gallery Theatre, at 93, Stamford Road on Thursday from 10am to 12.30pm. Those interested can call 6337-3685 for more information.

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- See more at: <http://www.straitstimes.com/premium/news/story/friends-the-museums-help-tell-the-singapore-story-20150517#sthash.77NPqyBx.dpuf>