

the only way she could heal herself and find joy.

"Whatever plant I am doing, it's my favorite plant and they are my enjoyment," Yeav said.

Young participants in the program are diaspora from the Khmer community, ages 15 to 20 years old. Every other Saturday, they engage in inter-generational dialogues with elders and learn from their experience. Two youths are paired with an elder and an interpreter, and they earn the opportunity to ask about the elder's life story and their story with the garden.

Marlyn Sorm and Richany Sorm are a pair of siblings who participated in the program. While Richany is one of the founding participants of the program last year, she brought

culture. Each grandmother regularly visits the temple. Marlyn believes listening to stories from elders in the program helps them learn more about their culture.

"Perspective is what helps you learn more because we only know our grand-ma's side of the story," said Sorm. "I believe just seeing how they are able to have a peaceful life here after struggling so much, is kind of what sticks with me."

Tessavan Ros, who is bilingual in Khmer and English, helped with interpretation for the program. Ros said he used to think the elders had enjoyed "a happy life" after they escaped from the Khmer Rouge, but he never learned about their struggles until he officially served the Khmer community as a community coordinator.

The Khmer Rouge was a brutal genocide that happened in the late 1970s. The Communist Party of Kampuchea was extremely opposed to the idea of westernization in the country. The CPK believed the ones who received proper education were impacted by the West. The Khmer Rouge killed millions of Cambodians. While most survivors were farmers, or people who lived in the rural area, the garden meant a lot for the elders as it connected them with the Cambodian environment.

The main goal of this program is initiating inter-generational conversations. Dominica Zhu, the founder of Global Wisdom Collectives, has been running programs internationally with indigenous populations. She has learned through experience that oral storytelling survives when there is natural trans-

missions, they are also recording the dialogues, and two young participants of the program volunteered to be videographers. Stephanie Ung, the co-executive director of KCSKC, said it was difficult to ask for consent in advance from the elders.

"Our interpreters had to explain the purpose of it and encourage it to the point where they have said yes," said Ung. "But they do know the hope is to preserve this for the future generation."

The program has been running for almost two months. Zhu hopes the program could be continuously going on, becoming another way that youths learn about their culture other than basic introductions.

"Sparkling that curiosity is really important, and not just going to school and being on your device as a way to understand yourself," said Zhu. ■

The Katha Chest is a heartwarming tale of home, memory, and childhood

By Savita Krishnamoorthy
IE Contributor

Radhiah Chowdhury is a consummate storyteller and bibliophile who "grew up at the mercy of a highly enthusiastic children's librarian". *The Katha Chest* is a heartwarming tale of home, memory, childhood, and inter-generational familial bonds that endure through time.

The story is centered around Asiya who loves visiting her Nanu's home and discovering the many treasures that are housed within. Her favorite, however, is the katha chest filled with soft sari quilts handmade by her Nanu. The chest itself becomes a metaphor for Asiya's imagination, the keeper of her family's stories and memories; memories that are hidden away in its folds and escape when the kathas are unfurled, revealing trapped and perhaps, forgotten ones.

One of the oldest forms of embroidery that originated in ancient India, the katha tradition is prominent in the Indian states of West Bengal, Orissa, as well as in Bangladesh. This art of stitching over patchwork cloth was a testa-

ment to the ingenuity and prudence of rural women in the region who practiced recycling and sustainable living long before they became trendy in our modern world. The katha embroidery is a simple running stitch that forms beautiful, intricate patterns. Asiya's explorations similarly follow the path of the stitches, weaving stories and unlocking memories.

Chowdhury masterfully braids different facets of Asiya's family history in the story. The circular patterns on a quilt remind Asiya of her Boro Khalu's medal (the Swadhinata Padak) that he received for his military service to the nation, a paint stained yellow one, her aunt Mejo, and the white streaked quilt reminds her of her widowed aunt, Choto Khala's mourning sari. Her favorite, however, is her mother's katha! Asiya's memories are triggered by the smells that escape when she burrows deep into it—this smorgasbord of the scents of tea, ink, and tomato sauce are all reminiscent of familiarity, security, and home.

The author is deliberate in centering the women in Asiya's family, paying homage

to their strength and their struggles. They are juxtaposed in heartwarming scenes where different generations of women gather to drink tea and swap stories.

Lavanya Naidu's illustrations are gorgeous, with many pages devoted purely to the images. They depict vignettes from Asiya's family and thread together the narrative seamlessly. Naidu's mastery over the craft is evident in the detailed patterns of the katha quilts, and in the contrasting earthy and jewel toned color palette that celebrates the artistic and cultural heritage of Bangladesh. Many of the illustrations, with their clean, crisp lines (especially in the figures) are reminiscent of the Pattachitra tradition of panel paintings, a form of folk painting practiced in Bengal. The borders, framed with repetitive and intricate patterns, create a uniformity between the different scenes represented.

The illustrations will also delight the textile lover because of the care and attention Naidu bestows by painstakingly rendering the patterns on the kathas. For example, each square in the patchwork quilt is comprised of a different design in a multitude of colors. There

is even an illustration that is devoted to the ancient Indian art of hand block textile printing.

The language is clear and easy to understand, even when the author intentionally chooses to use certain vernacular names. A nod to her heritage, she eludes the trap of over explaining and oversimplifying terms, because we can understand the meaning and context even if we do not share the author's cultural heritage. A curated list of additional resources for more information on the history and practice of the katha tradition would serve the reader well.

At the end of the book are the Author and Illustrator's Notes, both endearing and personal. Chowdhury and Naidu reiterate their own connect with kathas, and its importance in their lives while growing up in Bangladesh and Kolkata, respectively.

Readers 4+ will enjoy *The Katha Chest* for its touching tale of intricately entwined family memories and beautiful illustrations seen through the lens of living tradition of katha. ■