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SUDS OF HOPE



Students trying their hand at soap-making at the Community Engagement Festival of NUS' College of Alice & Peter Tan – after working together in groups to clean soap slivers collected from hotels, they reconstitute them using a simple hand-operated machine. PHOTOS: COLLEGE OF ALICE & PETER TAN





(Left) Students working with community groups to make soap at the Community Engagement Festival, and (right) Dr Tan Lai Yong visiting a workers' dormitory last December to distribute soap bars. The Soap for Hope project also organises workshops for migrant workers to teach them how to recycle used soap.

Students from NUS college recycle used soap bars from hotels to distribute to migrant workers as part of Soap for Hope project

Veena Vinod

Mr Joshua Peh scrapes off chunks of hair and dirt from bars of used soap into a bowl. Then he slices the "cleaned up" soap into smaller pieces before soaking them in food-safe bleach.

Mr Peh, 24, does this with his peers from the National University of Singapore (NUS) every month.

What they do might come across as disgusting to some people, but to the group of 100 students from NUS' College of Alice & Peter Tan, it is a meaningful activity.

For the past year, they have been engaged in a project to reconstitute used soap bars from hotels for migrant workers in Singapore.

On April 2, they showcased their project at the annual Community Engagement Festival of College of Alice & Peter Tan, the residential college in University Town.

"This project has been an opportunity for me to learn more about migrant workers as well as see how simple modifications can transform waste into something useful," said Mr Peh, a third-year student from the college.

To date, more than 1,000 migrant workers have benefited from the Soap for Hope project, an initiative by two lecturers, Ms Sue Chang-Koh and Dr Tan Lai Yong.

Ms Chang-Koh is the college's associate director for outreach and community engagement, while Dr Tan is the director. The idea came about when they met Mr Stefan Phang last year. Mr Phang is the director for corporate social responsibility of Sealed Air, an international packaging company.

Sealed Air, which has started similar projects for disadvantaged communities in India and Cambodia, shared its experiences with Ms Chang-Koh and Dr Tan. This became the inspiration for Soap for Hope.

Said Ms Chang-Koh: "A 400-room hotel produces 3.5 tonnes of soap waste annually. We wanted to create a project that finds a useful way of utilising this waste that would otherwise be sent to landfills."

While the idea of recycling used soap is not new here – hotels such as Crowne Plaza Changi Airport, Conrad Centennial Singapore, and Hilton Singapore are doing it themselves to help disadvantaged people in the region – NUS' project aims to help migrant workers in Singapore.

HealthServe, a charity which provides healthcare assistance to injured migrants and a long-time partner of the college, was chosen to be the beneficiary.

A spokesman for HealthServe said: "The Soap for Hope project has provided an opportunity for our beneficiaries to engage in service work to benefit other migrant workers. We look forward to continuing this project."

The NUS students get the used soap bars from Sealed Air, which collected them from hotels here such as Hilton and Shangri-La.

The annual operation cost of the project is negligible and it is funded by Sealed Air and the College of Alice & Peter Tan.

Making a 200g soap bar from used soap takes four steps and about five minutes.First, soap bars are scraped of their dirt using knives and then cut up into smaller chunks. These pieces are rinsed in food-safe bleach to get rid of germs.

Essential oils are then added to the soap, and this is followed by a process in which a hand-operated soap press turns the soap into bars.

Soap for Hope has roped in secondary schools and junior colleges, as well as the Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore to help make the soap bars.

It also organises workshops for migrant workers to teach them how to recycle used soap.

Said Mr Peh, who has been organising the workshops: "Being involved in this project changed my view on migrant workers. I used to think of them as out of sight, out of mind, but now I recognise that they have a lot to offer to Singapore."

The soap bars have received rave reviews from migrant workers – some of them have asked if they could get more of them for other workers in their dormitories.

Mr Fu Jian Sheng, 46, a construction worker from China who has participated in three of the soap-making workshops, said: "I think the project is very meaningful.

"Most of the soap I made went to Bangladeshi workers in my dormitory, who were very thankful."

veenavin@sph.com.sg

A NEW UNDERSTANDING

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MR JOSHUA PEH, on organising Soap for Hope workshops for migrant workers

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