



Selfless Shoe

'Buy one, give one free' – Students relates to Singaporean Kiasuism to better the world.



Soles from the kind Soul

The plight of soleless children in China inspired Justine Lee with the idea of Selfless Shoes, an innovative business idea for a social enterprise to provide necessities like shoes for them.

The timely opportunity of the Mayor's Imagine Social Entrepreneurship (MISE) competition then enabled him to turn his idea into reality.

And together with two friends from different courses within Ngee Ann Polytechnic, the only Polytechnic team who competed emerged second place in the year-long competition with more than 80 participant teams from various schools, including universities, in Singapore.

But unlike the other teams who came up with ideas only for the competition or got the ideas from the organizations they want to help, the Selfless Shoes team first conceived the idea and so, the competition was more a means to their end. Winning the competition and the grants that came with it will turn their dreams into reality. This explained the students' rugged determination to make Selfless Shoes a reality despite their heavy school workload.

"Sometimes we really wanted to give up. We don't even know if we would get into the next round but we managed persevered and pulled through because we had a selfless goal. This is not just a competition for us but a way to get funding for our idea," said Justine, 18, who had exams and projects in the course of the competition.

He explained: “We didn’t have the resources or help to carry out Selfless Shoes without the competition then.”

A Step at a time

At the end of the competition, grants up to \$30,000 were given out by the Community Development Councils (CDC) on a case-by-case basis to groups with feasible business plans. Selfless Shoes was one of the few fortunate groups to receive \$25,000 to start up their social enterprise. But with only one condition: the beneficiary organization has to be from the CDC.

They chose We Love Learning (WELL), a nurture program for needy students in the heartlands here. Although the ultimate aim of Justine is to provide shoes for the poor children in China and then the rest of the world, he believes in taking a small step forward first.

“The students do not need the shoes as much as the children in China but they still need them right?,” said Justine, who has visited WELL at Henderson Community Centre with his partners, John Tay, 19, and Lim Jing Ying, 18, for three times already.

For now, the three students are taking a small but steady step forward and laying their foundations for the social enterprise – first seeking out manufacturers for their shoes, collecting designs from friends and accepting online pre-orders for the shoes – and resisting the temptation to get carried away with all the big ideas they already have in mind. Said Justine: “One slow but steady step at a time.”

But even this tiny step has raised questions for the trio and made them think and grow. Like for many social enterprises, many have asked them why not do a fundraiser or even start up a charity instead?

“We could have done a fundraiser but how long can the money keep coming in?” he said. “So many people need shoes... We have to do this long-term and a business is the only way to ensure the money comes in constantly.”

Besides ensuring a constant stream of income to buy shoes for the poor, by manufacturing the shoes on their own, Selfless Shoes checks they are of good quality too.

Buy one, Give one free

“Buy one, get one free!” Does that sound familiar to you? The concept of Selfless Shoes works in a similar way. Only this time, it’s “buy one, *give* one free”. For every pair of Selfless Shoes, a less fortunate child gets saved from sole up – from walking around barefooted for miles to get water or anywhere else.

“It’s not like in Singapore where our flooring is still considered okay. They are in the mountains, it is very dangerous when they get cuts. Infections from the dirt and grime might lead to more severe diseases or even death,” said Justine, who made a couple of trips down to China to see for himself. “Also, shoes and daily supplies are not the only thing they need. Sometimes, for an essential like clean water, they have to trek miles and miles barefooted, and we Singaporeans complain about NEWater.”

So, be a kind soul today. Start saving lives, one sole at a time. SOuLe, the first type of shoes the Selfless Shoes team is selling, an ordinary, plain pair of canvas shoes that has extraordinary value to the recipients of the second pair of the same shoes such as needy students and orphans. Online pre-orders for the shoes have already begun at <http://www.selfless-shoe.blogspot.com>.

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