

LIFE&TIMES GREEN

Seeds of social enterprise

It's possible to reuse trash in a creative way, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

THAT sofa in your sitting room has seen better days. Its frame is intact, but the upholstery is torn, discoloured and worn out.

In such cases, most people will replace it with a new sofa. A few may choose to get the sofa reupholstered, but the challenge is in finding someone who will work only on one sofa.

But there is one other option: Learn to reupholster the sofa yourself.

"That's the problem with 80 per cent of the people. They don't want to learn to make something with their hands," says Rashvin Pal Singh, 28, co-founder of Biji-Biji Initiative. "If you want to learn to reupholster your sofa, come to our open workshops and we'll show you how... for free."

Founded in 2012, Biji-Biji Initiative teaches how to make products from discarded materials, introduces the use of green technology



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Rashvin Pal Singh

and electronics and finds creative ways to reuse trash. The aim, says Rashvin, is to raise public awareness for the need to lead a greener life and to be accountable for waste in an inclusive and collaborative manner.

From May 22 to May 24, Rashvin and the Biji-Biji team will be at Festival Belia Putrajaya 2015. This year's event is themed Showcase Of Talent, which coincides with Rakan Muda's new philosophy to facilitate talent

development for youth. Some of the country's best talents are being featured at the festival as Rakan Muda mentors.

The other founders of Biji-Biji Initiative are Rashvin's long-time friends. "We studied together and at one time, we all stayed in the same condominium unit. You could say that when the stars were aligned, we got together and realised we shared a common vision to have a business that operated differently," says Rashvin.

At its core, the business at Biji-Biji Initiative values sustainable living.



Rashvin (right) and his team members at last year's Shell Sustainable Development Grants Awards in KL, where they showed off the 'bicycle blender', a contraption built from recycled materials.



This practice started from young for Rashvin who grew up in Ampang, Selangor.

He says: "My mum was very strict about not wasting things. When the toothpaste was finished, we had to cut the tube in half and use what was left instead of just throwing it out. Clothes were not just thrown away; they were recycled."

Things that can be reused may be something as simple and unassuming as a car seatbelt. Rashvin brings out a bag and says: "This is made from discarded PVC banners. For any event, the organiser will print bunnings and banners which are usually discarded once the events are over. These banners are water resistant and durable, so we convert them into bags, vertical gardens, pencil boxes and recycling bins."

At a recent fair, a man looked at some of these PVC bags and suggested that the team strengthen the handle by using discarded seatbelts.

Rashvin says: "We went to all the workshops in Kuala Lumpur (and eventually the factory itself) and bought all the discarded seatbelts which did not make the safety grade even though they were made from resilient nylon webbing. They may

be no good as seatbelts, but they're durable and good enough for our purpose."

SOCIAL VALUES

The second element is the need for the business to embody social values. This means getting others involved in what they are doing.

"We cannot achieve what we want on our own. We need others to be aware of what we're doing. Education is the key," he says.

One such initiative is Camp Benih where Rashvin and his team teach youths how they can create furniture using discarded material. Unwanted pallets, scrap metal and diesel drums are converted into stools, coffee tables and shoe cabinets.

The final element is financial transparency. For this, Rashvin falls back on the knowledge he gained when pursuing a degree in accounting and finance and having worked at PricewaterhouseCoopers in the Advisory Unit.

He says: "I learnt a lot in those four years. We were thrown into meetings and we dealt with everyone from company CEOs to rank and file. I learnt that how you talked to each person and how you conveyed your message was very important."

"Everyone is an individual and is deserving of respect. It's actually



Ingenious use of discarded materials.



cent of the total value of the projects must go back to paying the salaries of our employees."

Take for example a project that earns them a revenue of RM1 million: 30 per cent of this (which will be channelled back into the company) would be RM300,000. If the salaries payable for that project is RM200,000, the surplus RM100,000 will be distributed to the staff in terms of bonus.

This way, Rashvin says, the staff's goals are directly aligned with that of Biji-Biji's.

But wouldn't knowing how much the boss takes home be too much information for the staff?

Rashvin doesn't agree. He says: "When the staff don't feel they are appreciated and that they're doing all the work while the boss is getting all the money, they start to suffer from mental stress. There will be low morale and unnecessary bickering. The employee may still do the work, but he's just waiting to leave. We don't tell our employees exactly how much we earn. We have different bands. We, the founders of the company, will be in Band 1, for which there is a salary range. For the rest, some are in Band 2 and so on. By creating these bands, we're eliminating the need for our staff to talk about it. They are more focused on the work."

So far, the business model seems to be working because it is a matter of pride for Rashvin that in November last year, Biji-Biji Initiative won the Alliance Bank SME Innovation Challenge.

There were two parts to the competition: Public voting and a pitch.

"To get the public to vote for us, we relied on our Biji-Biji Backbenchers (our mothers and friends)," he says with a smile. "They asked their colleagues to vote for us while we set up camps at universities and sent out fliers."

"For our pitch, we had to say what we would do differently if we won the competition. We decided we would invest the prize money (RM250,000) in our business to capture the consumers."

"Until now, we've been dealing entirely with businesses. With this money, we can buy more machines and tools, invest in branding and remodel our website (www.biji-biji.com). All these will allow us to make things in volume and reach a larger market."

MONEY MATTERS

With that in mind, Rashvin and his co-founders at the Biji-Biji Initiative have a policy that "the gap between the highest earner and the lowest cannot be more than five times. Furthermore, every six months, 30 per



Recycling bottles into shades

Recycling the creative way



From left: Lim Kok Boon, Robert Chng and Madam Chia, principal of Wesley Methodist School, KL at the launch.

THE Malaysian Plastics Manufacturers Association (MPMA) and Chevron Phillips Chemical Malaysia Sdn Bhd (Chevron Phillips Chemical) recently launched a competition, Young Sustainability Innovators Award 2015, for Wesley Methodist School Kuala Lumpur (WMSKL).

The objectives were to create innovations and inventions from recyclables, boost students' interest towards research and development as well as science and technology and help students sharpen their creative and innovative thinking skills.

Robert Chng, director of Chevron Phillips Chemical, said: "Our sustainability efforts are aimed at creating a comprehensive approach to enhancing performance in a safe and socially responsible way. We understand that we must be able to improve the lives of today's society without compromising the ability of future generation to do the same."

He said the competition will,

hopefully, create a culture of recycling among the students.

MPMA president Lim Kok Boon said: "The competition will challenge the students to think out of the box. It encourages students to take discarded or recycled materials and to turn them into new, functional products. We are, therefore, eager to see their ideas and what they will do."

The competition will be held over a three-month period. Beginning April 29, it ends on July 29, 2015. The students will have to create innovations from recyclables at the lowest possible cost.

This is a second joint effort between MPMA, Chevron Phillips Chemical and WMSKL. The first was an environment boot camp. The school is an active participant in Local Agenda 21 Kuala Lumpur and is recognised as a green school under the World Wide Fund For Nature schools programme.

Lim said the programme is timely as Solid Waste Corporation Malaysia (SWCorp Malaysia) has

announced that from September 2015, households in six states must separate their garbage in transparent plastic bags while regular wastes such as food and organic wastes also can be placed into plastic bags. The states are Johor, Malacca, Negri Sembilan, Pahang, Perlis and Kedah.

He added that MPMA supports these efforts and suggested that SWCorp encourage the public to use degradable bags for organic waste and plastic bags for recyclables.

He explained: "Degradable bags and organic waste can be used as compost, while plastic bags can be recycled with recyclable waste. This will make the recycling efforts more efficient."

Both Lim and Chng agreed that the MPMA-Chevron Phillips Chemical Young Sustainability Innovators Award 2015 will be an excellent platform to inspire a fresh approach to recycling as well as instill in the students an interest in engineering and designing.



The launch of the MPMA-Chevron Phillips Chemical Young Sustainability Innovators Award 2015.