

LIFE&TIMES FAMILY

Adding colour to hope

When donors engage in more meaningful ways with the causes they support, the rewards are infinite, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

WHEN a company comes along to help a shelter home under the banner of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), it may clean up the place or do a little more and paint the building.

"This was what we used to do," says Gladys Goh Kaye Jen, 38, group general manager for Nippon Paints. "We used to donate paint and give money to deserving causes. But last year, we decided to do something more meaningful."

This, she says, included things like reinforcing the security of the shelter homes, repairing broken roof tiles and changing doorknobs.

For this, Nippon Paints partnered with Persatuan Kebajikan Generasi Gemilang (PKGG), a non-profit welfare organisation that aims to build strong families in the hope of raising a generation of exemplary people. The project they came up with was Colourful Dreams, with the tagline, Create Joy For Today, Hope For Tomorrow.

"We believe that kids must be in a living environment that is positive," says Noelle Tan, 38, chief operating officer of PKGG.

Little did both women know how much of an impact this partnership, which started late last year, would have on their lives and those they choose to help.

It began with selecting the shelter homes to help. "We have certain selec-



Noelle (left) and Gladys joining forces for a meaningful cause.

tion criteria," says Noelle. "The home must be registered with the Welfare Department. There must be at least 20 children staying in the home. They must have a motivation for and the aspiration to change."

She is at pains to mention that, "we also made sure that these children were protected and not exposed to harm. We told our contractors not to give them money and that there could be no personal contact with the children. They also had to be good role models. For instance, they couldn't smoke on the premises nor could they do things like take pictures of the children and putting them on Facebook."

Two homes have benefited from Colourful Dreams so far. The first is Rumah Juara, a Christian-based children's welfare home in Petaling Jaya which cares for close to 40 children

under the age of 18. The second is Pure Life Society, founded by Swami Satyananda and under the stewardship of Datin Paduka Mother A. Mangalam. Pure Life Society cares for 75 boys and girls.

"We have two more homes to complete in the next quarter. Our overall target is to complete 25 homes in the next five years," says Gladys. "This doesn't mean we'll stop there. It's just a milestone. For now, we're concentrating on homes in the Klang Valley because we're new to this and we're also learning the ropes."

Once the physical transformation of the homes was completed, Noelle says they held small celebrations and two-day workshops (called Thumb-Printz) where the children were given a chance to paint which allowed their creativity to come to life. The workshops also helped to build confidence

and give a sense of identity and purpose to these children.

"We wanted to give them a sense of identity. Charity demeans a person's dignity. It means that I can only be on the receiving end and it's a hand-out mentality. What we wanted to inculcate was a 'hand up' mentality. We want them to walk past the murals they created and feel proud that this is part of their work."

The colourful transformation can be viewed on YouTube (<http://youtu.be/QqlSOBKw8-I>). It features Hari and Dashan, two boys in good cheer and happy to see the changes in their living spaces.

In the video, Noelle tells two stories that further demonstrate the impact this project has had on the children's lives.

"Remember that these children don't have any personal space or anything that's their own. So, we helped them create a Treasure Box which is a space they can call their own. They can put anything in it and know it's safe. One boy - he's only six - painted several Spiderman all over his box. When we asked him why, he said that he wants to be a hero," she recalls.

"Then there's this girl aged about 13. We didn't know she had a sibling in the house because we'd separated the children according to age groups. When the projects were done, we decided to take photographs of the children with their box - you know, those instant polaroid photos. This would give them something to put inside the box. This girl stood in line and had her photo taken. Then, she



lined up again and when we asked her why she wanted another photo, she said, she wanted to give the other one to her brother to keep in his box.

"Next, she called her brother and asked if we could take a photograph of them together. She said that this was the first time they had a family picture taken."



Before and after - The Pure Life building gets a touch of color.



Gladys's sons in their Transformers' outfits.

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The ThumbPrintz workshop.

Of course, Noelle's team agreed and each sibling had photos to keep in their treasure box.

"We didn't know that what we had done would have such a deep impact on them," says Noelle.

Gladys adds: "Please don't think we're doing this to get a reward or that we want appreciation. What we hope is that these children will have that sense of belonging, the confidence to grow up and become somebody someday."

"Somebody", according to Noelle, defines a person who makes a difference in someone else's life.

That said, they are surprised by the level of appreciation they've received. "Usually, we just get a letter," says Gladys. "Can you believe that Datin Paduka Mother Mangalam actually composed a poem for us?"

Noelle, who left the corporate world, says she's found "something beyond success. I wanted to give the best years of my life to young children".

From this experience, Gladys says she has a deeper understanding of her own children. "When I used to buy expensive gifts for my son, he never took care of them. He would break them fast. One day, I decided that enough was enough. From now on, he has to make his own toys. Like when he was interested in Transformers. Instead of buying him a Transformer toy, I made a simple one. I drew the picture on two pieces of cardboards and tied them together with a string,

like a sandwich board. He puts it on and he feels like one of the Transformers," she says. "You know what, he keeps this safely and it's not torn or destroyed.

"And in terms of money - how much did we spend? Nothing."

Noelle puts Gladys's entire experience into perspective: "Children love to work with their hands. It empowers them. The best part of it is that they get to experience a relationship with you and that is actually all a child wants."

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Passages & halls internal and external
Of variegated shapes and colours
Nourishing the forlorn souls unto colourful dreams*

*Praise be to Generasi Gemilang
A name to remember
In the annals of Pure Life
Noble are they in their service
To the kids nurtured by us
Soar do they together to heights of fame
and success*

Poem by Datin Paduka Mother Mangalam delivered to celebrate the success of the Colourful Dreams project at Pure Life Society (June 8, 2013)

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