

Helping hands

One man's idea has developed into a global operation saving thousands of lives each year, all with a humble bar of soap.

Words Lindy Davis

Shawn Seipler was just another American corporate working for an e-commerce technology company. As a frequent business flyer he was used to travelling from his base in Florida and staying in hotels across the United States several days a week.

"One evening I was in Minneapolis on business and after a shower I had this thought and immediately called the front desk. I asked them what they did with the soap once I checked out of my room. They informed me they threw it away," says Seipler.

More than three million bars of partially used soap are discarded from hotels worldwide every day. The idea that the soap was consistently being wasted got Seipler thinking. He did some research to see if it was possible for soap to be safely recycled.

"My eureka moment came once I discovered WHO [World Health Organization] studies done in Africa and Asia that showed 9000 children under the age of five were dying every day from pneumonia and diarrhoeal disease. I couldn't help thinking if we could somehow get that soap to these kids, it would make a difference," he says.

The studies showed these were leading causes of death among children worldwide. However, it was also acknowledged if children were given soap and taught proper hygiene practices, the rate could be halved.

Seipler researched the feasibility of recycling soap and transporting it to the countries most in need. It became clear that soap alone wouldn't be enough and an effective hygiene-education kit needed to accompany it. He resigned from his sales and marketing job and approached several hotel chains with his idea. The Marriot Properties were early adopters of the programme, followed by Walt Disney World Resorts. He spent the next few months outfitting a small recycling unit in his garage and getting volunteers on board with the idea.

With the help of business partner Paul Till, he purchased a commercial meat grinder, four large cookers and other necessary equipment required for recycling soap.

"My family were really supportive. We literally sat on plastic buckets around a central table for hours at a time using potato peelers to scrape away the outside layer and surface clean the soap. We'd shovel it into the meat grinders, before putting it into the cookers to sterilise and reduce it to a paste."

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cleantheworld.org

The paste was then tipped into wax paper moulds and left to dry before being cut, packaged and boxed for distribution.

It wasn't long before the project outgrew the space and they moved into larger factory premises in downtown Orlando. Clean the World (CTW), founded in 2009, became the first and only high-volume global soap recycling programme.

"We hadn't intended for CTW to become a non-profit, we started out as a 'green' recycling business with an upside to improving the quality of life for children. It became obvious we couldn't sustain it as a completely voluntary programme so we changed our business model to a social entrepreneurial one, where hotels pay a fee to partner with CTW." Hotels pay per month to have their used soap removed and in doing so, become part of an altruistic global project.

Seipler says without a doubt CTW was the biggest risk he's ever taken. "I'd given up my job running a global sales team to put all my time into CTW. I sold all my stock options and blew my kids college fund. The final point came when my car was repossessed. Basically I spent every dollar to make this thing happen."

His resolve paid off. Today, CTW distributes 40 million soap bars every year to 115 countries. A recent WHO study shows the infant mortality rate for children under five suffering from diarrhoeal disease has reduced by 35 per cent.

"We live in a world that's full of challenges and if we want sustainable solutions to our problems, we can't rely on our governments. Charities and NGOs are on the job, but we really need the private sector to step up," says Seipler.

"I really wanted to help make a change in this world and the soap project was something I believed could happen." **g**

