

The 7th Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Service Learning

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Abstract: Community building, placemaking and rootedness – A ground-up solution of building communities through collective reimagination and reinvention of the use of public spaces to bring back “Kampung Spirit”

Introduction

Singapore used to have something called “Kampung Spirit” but it was lost somehow during our rapid growth from third world to a first world nation. Ground-up Initiative (GUI) aims to revive the sense of community and resilience through the building of a Kampung Kampus by the community, for the community. “Traditionally, leaders have been too concerned with the wrong part of their tree - surface level qualities like behaviors or actions, instead of the roots that establish values, beliefs, experiences, emotions and thoughts that ultimately define a leader. Behaviors and actions come from within, and your principles, intentions, thoughts and emotions determine whether these actions are genuine or insincere”¹. The solution that GUI initiated is to bring about changes from within.

Unsustainable economic development, disillusioned citizens, loss of the sense of rootedness to one’s country, social disparity are common issues that many countries are grappling with at different stages of development. Instead of waiting for the government to provide solutions and resolutions, a group of concerned individuals stepped up to initiate ideas and solutions. Resources might be limited for them but with two of the most powerful tools that they could wield; imagination and guts, they managed to create a nature-inspired classroom, Kampung Kampus, to re-shape the people’s values and culture.

Background to Ground-Up Initiative (GUI)

GUI began as an small farming community in Lim Chu Kang back in 2008. Instrumental for birthing this ground up movement is its late founder, Tay Lai Hock. He firmly believed that Singapore and its urbanized habitants are badly in need of a protected green space for healing in a community setting, guided by the ‘5 G’ values – Gracious, Green, Giving, Grounded and Grateful’. Through which, a sense of rootedness can be cultivated. That mission is now carried

¹ Bob Rosen “The 6 Roots of a Grounded Leader”

on by a core team of courageous and equally determined and stoic individuals, supported by a sizeable number of ardent volunteers from diverse backgrounds and from all walks of life.

Shaping Social and Cultural Values

GUI aspires to become the place where individuals can come together to experience and rethink alternatives to common assumptions of the Singaporean way of life.

If one can decide on the dollar value for investing in the nurturing of exemplary character, desirable non-materialistic values, what would it cost? How can it be measured? Would we as a nation, believe in its intrinsic value enough to invest in it without expecting the typical ROIs government agencies, business owners and investors are accustomed to?

Two years ago, on 18 Feb 2017, when delivering a speech during the opening of Phase 1 of Kampung Kampus, Minister Desmond Lee said “when like-minded people come together with different perspectives but wanting to co-create new spaces and implement new ideas, they will be fully invested in the project. Because they’re not giving views, they’re not giving suggestions for other people to take up – they are themselves, front and centre in making it succeed”.

Since 2008, 89,000 people have walked through the doors of Kampung Kampus as it continue to be a space for all to come and heal, connect and to recharge. Through various hands-on programs such as food crop harvesting, enzyme making, craft-based activities and etc, GUI has worked with over 500 schools and companies (last recorded on Aug 2018). Week after week, GUI attracted volunteers from all walks of life to our flagship program call Balik Kampung to maintain and upkeep the space while experiencing the “Gotong Royong” spirit of taking care of their own living environment.

The true value of GUI is not what it represents but how it goes about achieving its goals. Through the process of empowerment and engagement, many people realized their true values as individuals and not the role they played in the organization or in the family. This is visible through the following:

- Full-time staff of GUI started off as volunteers and they assumed leadership roles voluntarily
- Volunteers are empowered to undertake key roles based on their strengths and readiness
- Views are sought before making key decisions
- Leaders are active hands-on workers on the ground
- GUI programmes focus on real work rather than entertainment type of activities
- The kampung was built through contributions by many organization and individuals

The achievement and progress of the organization was attained not by success but by failures. The leadership team and the volunteers went through many years of below average performance and mistakes made in many aspects of operations. There were attrition of staff and volunteers but the journey has proved to be valuable. The deliberate decision to register the organization as a society rather than charity bears the hallmark of the founder's decision to be self-reliant rather than relying on charity funding.

Incubator of Social Enterprises

Over the years, the space in GUI had groomed several social enterprises. Sustainable Living Lab, Family 家和农, Wow Kampung Pte Ltd, Touchwood Pte Ltd. Some progress further to create greater impact in the industry beyond Singapore. Several active individuals went on to start successful businesses to pursue their passion in pushing forward sustainable living.

Brick by Brick

The GUI journey has been an unceasing adventure for many. Bricks were made, farms, fences, roads have been built painstakingly by its leaders, volunteers and supporters.

GUI continues to carry on the torch left behind by its founder so that we can look forward to a better Singapore together. GUI is far from perfect, but its group of imperfect people is intent in trying to make things a little bit better in this country we live in, in a world that is becoming increasingly more broken and disconnected. In order to realize its vision and mission, GUI's key leaders are currently re-considering the options available, weighing in the advantages and gains from acquiring charity status.

Surely GUI's poster presentation and participation in the 7th Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Service Learning - *Service Learning: A lifelong Journey of Social Responsibility* is then another step taken forward in its lifelong journey.