

Taking 'toilet training' abroad

'Toilet champ' sits on World Economic Forum council to table topics such as sanitation

By Melissa Sim



Long-time champion of clean toilets Jack Sim uses 'toilet humour' to get people comfortable talking about the topic. -- PHOTO: COURTESY OF JACK SIM

JACK Sim's not bothered by people who think he's a joke for championing toilets.

He has bigger things to worry about.

A TOILET COLLEGE TOO World Toilet Organisation

Founded: 2001

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Like how to provide water sanitation for the 40 per cent of the world's population who don't have it and as a result, die of diseases carried by contaminated drinking water.

He has been asked to be part of a council that will table topics such as this for discussion by the World Economic Forum (WEF), which will be held in Davos, Switzerland next year.

The World Toilet Organisation he set up in 2001 now has 133 member organisations in 50 countries, including Japan, Canada, and Australia.

Since 2001, it has organised an annual World Toilet Summit, during which countries share their expertise and present updates on the latest developments in sanitation and clean water.

This year, the summit will be held in Macau in November on the theme of using business to ensure sustainable sanitation.

As the world's resources become scarcer and climate change contributes to changing weather patterns, access to water will become a contentious issue, and the source of conflicts and power struggles in many places.

Mr Sim could hardly have picked a more important battle.

But still, not everyone takes the 51-year-old social entrepreneur seriously, though he has come a long way from those publicity pictures of himself holding a toilet brush or potty to promote the Restroom Association of Singapore.

That was in 1998, when he first latched on to the idea of promoting clean toilets. Then-prime minister Goh Chok Tong had suggested that the cleanliness of public toilets could be an indicator of social grace.

Said Mr Sim, who is married with three children: 'At the time, I had earned enough money to retire and I was wondering what I could do with the rest of my life.'

After being involved in various businesses in building materials, real estate development and education, he was by then comfortably living off some property investments he had made.

Since money was not an issue, he threw himself into volunteer work.

Mr Sim thought some 'toilet humour' would get people comfortable talking about the topic. And, goodness knows, the state of public toilets then could have done with some sprucing up.

But he always had wider sights. In 2001, he set up the organisation to promote discussion of water sanitation issues around the world.

Mr Sim really got the ball rolling. This April, he was asked by the WEF - a meeting of leaders, top businessmen, academics and social entrepreneurs - to join the Global Agenda Council for Water Security.

The council's role is to identify important issues on water to table as topics for discussion at the forum.

The 18 members of the council include academics in water research, environmental studies, law and policy, and top representatives from companies such as Nestle and Coca-Cola.

And then there is Mr Jack Sim, who is listed as: Founder and director of the World Toilet Organisation, Singapore.

'It's a big milestone for us, because we are just a six-person organisation. And probably the smallest global NGO (non-governmental organisation) in the world,' he chuckled.

Whatever anyone may think of him, he gets two to three requests for interviews each week from the media, and has been featured on the National Geographic Channel.

In Singapore, however, all that work might as well be flushed away.

'The publicity around me is always and only about clean toilets,' he laughed.

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