

Not as Dumb as It Seems

Written by Wu Hsiao-ting
Sunday, 25 May 2008 00:00

Scrap glass is heavy to handle and doesn't sell for very much, so it would seem stupid to waste much time and effort on it. However, in one rural county in China, residents use bicycles and wheelbarrows to collect used bottles and jars. They reuse what others only see as "garbage," and they decrease the damage to the environment.



For 20 years, Zhang Liangshui (张梁水) used to bicycle from neighborhood to neighborhood, collecting and buying cardboard, plastics, and other recyclables. He would pile everything on his bike, collecting every type of recyclable material imaginable--except glass. He deemed glass too dangerous, cumbersome, and difficult to transport. Furthermore, it wasn't worth much money.

Zhang would even go so far as to break the fluorescent tubes he collected, retrieve the more valuable metal within, and throw away the glass. It never occurred to him that poisonous substances in the tubes, such as mercury, could escape and cause serious environmental damage.

One day, he passed a house cluttered with piles and piles of recyclable trash. He stopped in and asked the owner, Huang Yuyin (黄玉音), if he could buy it from her. Unexpectedly, Huang launched into a talk about the importance of environmental protection and a charity foundation called Tzu Chi.

Huang also made a living collecting recyclables. Like Zhang, she canvassed the neighborhoods on her bicycle looking for stuff to collect. At home, she meticulously sorted out the things she had gathered. For example, plastic bags of different colors sold at different prices, so she would carefully separate them into different bundles. She worked long hours, often late into the night. But unlike Zhang, she kept only a small portion of the recyclable income for herself--the rest of the money she donated to Tzu Chi to help students from indigent families.

After hearing her story, Zhang was so touched by her selfless spirit that tears welled up in his eyes. What astonished him even more was that Huang, along with all the other Tzu Chi environmental volunteers, collected and recycled glass--something he deemed practically worthless.

Worth the effort

Bag after bag of waste glass, gathered from streets, restaurants, and clinics, converged at a recycling station set up at a factory owned by Tzu Chi volunteer Liao Chao-zhong (廖兆忠). Volunteers weighed the bags and found that they came to a total weight of 4.7 tons, valued at 520 renminbi (US\$75).

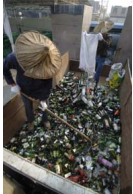
This was the result of more than 20 days of effort by a group of Tzu Chi volunteers living in Nanjing County, Fujian Province, southeastern China. The money was not much--only enough

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to help two or three impoverished students pay for a semester's tuition. In fact, an outsider might not even deem the amount of money earned worth the enormous effort. But for volunteer Liao Chao-zhong, the glass drive was eminently worthwhile.

"Can you imagine what it would look like if all this broken glass was scattered along riverbanks, under trees, or in the soil?" he asked.



Knowing that what they are doing helps the environment, Liao and a group of like-minded Tzu Chi volunteers are committed to recycling waste glass. The group of volunteers in Nanjing consists of Liao, his wife, and some local residents. Most days, they comb the streets for recyclables. Once a month they gather at the recycling station at Liao's textile factory to sort out the items they're collected. Between December 2006 and April this year, they recycled nearly 55 tons of glass, equivalent to over 98,000 glass bottles. That's about 5,800 bottles a month!

Low monetary profits, but high environmental benefits

Many locals in Nanjing earn a living by collecting metal cans and plastic bottles, but no one collects waste glass. It just doesn't pay to do so. Glass is difficult to transport, troublesome to separate by color (clear, green, and brown), and costly to recycle. Local recycling businesses refuse to take it because no one in the area wants to use it. Most factories would rather use fresh ingredients to make new glass than take the time and expense to recycle waste glass.

According to statistics, only 13 percent of glass is recycled in China. There's just not enough monetary incentive to bother with it. Empty wine bottles from restaurants, IV drip bottles from clinics, and seedling culture bottles from flower cultivators are carelessly tossed in the trash or discarded on the sides of roads, along rivers, or in fields. Not only is the litter an eyesore, but the broken glass is a safety hazard as well.

Glass never decomposes. A million years later it will still be there. For this reason alone, recycling glass has huge environmental benefits. Plus, glass recycling saves energy, reduces pollution, and decreases the use of natural resources. It takes more than 700 kilograms of quartz, a hundred kilograms of pure alkali, other raw chemical materials, heavy oil, and electricity to produce a ton of glass. Producing new glass undoubtedly has a large role in the consumption of the earth's resources.

In order to reduce the burden on the planet, the Tzu Chi volunteers in Nanjing County decided to take up the job of collecting waste glass. They looked everywhere for a recycling company that would purchase it. Finally, they found one in the city of Zhangzhou, about a 30-minute drive away. Furthermore, the company was willing to come to Nanjing periodically to collect the glass gathered by Tzu Chi volunteers. The company crushes the bottles and ships the broken glass to factories in Guangdong Province, southern China, or Shandong Province, eastern China, to be reprocessed and reused.

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Many supporters

Since the recycling program was initiated, more than 40 restaurants and clinics have agreed to donate their used glass bottles to Tzu Chi. Many local business owners are enthusiastic supporters of the program.

Liu Ren-ye (劉仁業), a Taiwanese orchid grower, is one of them. In the mountainous regions of Nanjing, the marked differences in temperatures between day and night are ideal for growing orchids. The climate in the county has spawned a large number of orchid cultivators, who in turn have created a large demand for seedling culture bottles. Liu observed that many of these bottles are broken during cultivation and transportation. Disposing of all the broken glass could be a big headache for the orchid growers, but Tzu Chi takes care of it all by collecting the broken glass for them.



Li Xiuxia (李秀霞), a practicing doctor who owns a clinic, is another supporter. She said that her husband was once cut by glass while swimming in a river. She did not want the same thing to happen to others, so in response to Tzu Chi's glass recycling project, she began to save her bottles for the volunteers.

Wu Xiaohong (吳小紅) is a restaurant owner. Her restaurant produces many empty glass beverage bottles. She used to put them out by the side of the road with the rest of the garbage to be collected, but they attracted flies and smelled bad. Sometimes vagrants would rummage through the trash, creating a mess and even causing bottles to roll into the road, thus posing a danger to passing cars. The police once fined her for this situation. She is more than glad that Tzu Chi volunteers come to her restaurant and take away the empty bottles. It solves a big headache for her.

Recycling to help indigent students

At the home of Tzu Chi volunteer Cheng Suli (程蘇麗), dozens of heavy, cumbersome bags filled with glass bottles lay in a large pile. It had taken Cheng and two other volunteers, Wang Baiying (王白瑩) and Zhuang Guoshan (莊國山), many trips to collect that much glass.



The three of them usually work together; Cheng rides a bicycle, Zhuang a tricycle, and Wang a motor scooter. They visit one restaurant after another and one clinic after another, picking up glass at each stop. Working together, they can collect more than ten large bags each trip. They tie the bags securely to their vehicles and bring them back to Cheng's home.

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A neighbor said she often sees Cheng going out to collect glass. Sometimes Cheng does not return home from such recycling runs until after dark. Then she works in front of her home, cleaning out the bottles, separating aluminum and plastic items from the bottles, and putting them in different groups. "All of us living around here know that she is collecting glass to help the needy," said the neighbor.

Cheng said that in the beginning her neighbors were curious as to why she had become a "garbage collector." "How much money do you earn a month by collecting garbage?" they would ask. Cheng knew that environmental protection was a novel idea to the locals, so she just told her neighbors she was using the proceeds from the sale of the recyclables to help the poor. By and by, some of her neighbors even began to gather recyclable items for her.

Wei Xiangui (魏向贵), Cheng's husband, said that his friends used to complain to him, "How could you let your wife become a garbage collector?" But instead of feeling embarrassed, he proudly replied, "My wife is doing recycling to help students from poor families."

It's not shameful to do the right thing

Xiaofen (筱芬), a 12th grader, is one of the students receiving financial aid from Tzu Chi. Her father, in his forties, is almost completely blind. They barely support themselves by selling vegetables they grow in the vacant lot in front of their house. Since there is no extra money for education, Tzu Chi has been providing financial help to put Xiaofen through school.

Her father is very grateful for Tzu Chi's help. He told Tzu Chi volunteers that he would ask his daughter to donate money to the foundation after she graduated and began to make money on her own. The volunteers said to him, "You don't need to wait until Xiaofen graduates. You can start helping others right now by recycling with us."

Thus, Xiaofen's father decided to help recycle glass too. Guided by others in the village, he began collecting waste glass to donate to Tzu Chi. He does not mind at all what his neighbors think when he picks up glass from the streets. Like the other Tzu Chi environmental volunteers in Nanjing, he believes that doing the right thing is never shameful.

More and more local people, like Xiaofen's father, have joined Tzu Chi's recycling program. Huang Yulai (黄玉来), a retired public official, not only joined Tzu Chi herself--but so did the rest of her family, including her aged parents, sons, daughters-in-law, sisters, nephews, and grandsons! They all became members as they began to identify with the ideals of Tzu Chi. Even Huang's 88-year-old mother picks up glass bottles from the sides of roads and rivers. Huang's brother, a vegetable peddler, uses used plastic bags collected by Huang to help cut down on the consumption of new bags.

"We're actually benefiting our posterity by protecting the earth," said Huang, a staunch supporter of environmental protection.

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