

The Sisters of Bali (typescript)

Melati Wijsen: Bali -- island of gods.

Isabel Wijsen: A green paradise.

MW: Or ... a paradise lost. Bali: island of garbage.

IW: In Bali, we generate 680 cubic meters of plastic garbage a day. That's about a 14-story building. And when it comes to plastic bags, less than five per cent gets recycled.

MW: We know that changes the image you may have of our island. It changed ours, too, when we learned about it, when we learned that almost all plastic bags in Bali end up in our drains and then in our rivers and then in our ocean. And those that don't even make it to the ocean, they're either burned or littered.

IW: So we decided to do something about it. And we've been working for almost three years now to try to say no to plastic bags on our home island. And we have had some significant successes.

How did you come up with the idea?

MW: We are sisters, and we go to the best school on earth: Green School, Bali. Green School is not only different in the way that it is built out of bamboo, but also in the way that it teaches. We are taught to become leaders of today, something a normal textbook cannot match.

IW: One day we had a lesson in class where we learned about significant people, like Nelson Mandela, Lady Diana and Mahatma Gandhi. Walking home that day, we agreed that we also wanted to be significant. Why should we wait until we are grown up to be significant? We wanted to do something now.

MW: Sitting on the sofa that night, we brainstormed and thought of all the issues facing Bali. And one thing that stood out to us the most was the plastic garbage. But that is a huge problem. So we looked into what was a realistic target for us kids: plastic bags. And the idea was born.

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MIW: We started researching, and let's just say, the more we learned, there was nothing good about plastic bags. And you know what? We don't even need them.

MW: We were really inspired by the efforts to say no to plastic bags in many other places, from Hawaii to Rwanda and to several cities like Oakland and Dublin.

Lessons learned

IW: And so the idea turned into the launch of "Bye Bye Plastic Bags."

MW: In the years that we have been campaigning, we have learned a lot.

Lesson number one: you cannot do it all by yourself. You need a big team of like-minded kids, and so we formed the Bye Bye Plastic Bags crew. The volunteer team includes children from all over the island, from both international and local schools. And together with them, we started a multi-layered approach, based on an on- and off-line signature petition, educational and inspirational presentations at schools and we raise general awareness at markets, festivals, beach clean-ups. And last but not least, we distribute alternative bags, bags like net bags, recycled newspaper bags or 100 percent organic material bags, all made by local initiatives on the island.

IW: We run a pilot village, home of 800 families. The village mayor was our first friend and he loved our T-shirts, so that helped. We focused on making the customers aware, because that's where the change needs to happen. The village is already two-thirds along the way of becoming plastic bag free. Our first attempts to get the government of Bali on board failed. So we thought, "Hmm ... a petition with one million signatures. They can't ignore us, right?"

MW: Right!

IW: But, who would have guessed one million signatures is, like, a thousand times a thousand?

Persistence

We got stuck – till we learned lesson number two: think outside the box. Someone mentioned that the Bali airport handles 16 million arrivals and departures a year.

MW: But how do we get into the airport?

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And here comes lesson number three: persistence.

Off we headed to the airport. We got past the janitor. And then it was his boss's boss, and then the assistant office manager, and then the office manager, and then ...

We got shuffled down two levels and thought, well, here comes the janitor again.

And after several days knocking on doors and just being kids on a mission, we finally got to the commercial manager of Bali airports. And we gave him the "Bali of plastic bags" speech, and being a very nice man, he said, [imitating the man's voice] "I cannot believe what I'm about say, but I'm going to give authorization to collect signatures behind customs and immigrations."

Champions

IW: In our first hour and a half there, we got almost 1,000 signatures. How cool is that?

Lesson number four: you need champions at all levels of society, from students to commercial managers to famous people. And thanks to the attraction of Green School, we had access to a steady stream of celebrities. Ban Ki Moon taught us that Secretary-Generals of the United Nations don't sign petitions – even if kids ask nicely.

But he promised to spread the word, and now we work closely with the United Nations.

MW: Jane Goodall taught us the power of a people's network. She started with just one Roots & Shoots group and now she has 4,000 groups around the world. We are one of them. She's a real inspiration. If you're a fellow Rotarian, nice to meet you. We're Interactors, the youngest department of Rotary International.

IW: But we have also learned much about patience,

MW: how to deal with frustrations,

IW: leadership,

MW: teamwork,

IW: friendship,

MW: we learned more about the Balinese and their culture

IW: and we learned about the importance of commitment.

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MW: It's not always easy. Sometimes it does get a little bit hard to walk your talk.

IW: But last year, we did exactly that. We went to India to give a talk, and our parents took us to visit the former private house of Mahatma Gandhi. We learned about the power of hunger strikes he did to reach his goals. Yes, by the end of the tour, when we met our parents again, we both made a decision and said, "We're going on a hunger strike!"

MW: And you can probably imagine their faces. It took a lot of convincing, and not only to our parents but to our friends and to our teachers as well. Isabel and I were serious about doing this. So we met with a nutritionist, and we came up with a compromise of not eating from sunrise to sunset every day until the governor of Bali would agree to meet with us to talk about how to stop plastic bags on Bali.

IW: Our "mogak makan," as it is called in Bahasa Indonesia, started. We used social media to support our goal and already on day two, police started to come to our home and school. What were these two girls doing? We knew we weren't making the governor look his best by doing this food strike – we could have gone to jail. But, hey, it worked. Twenty-four hours later, we were picked up from school and escorted to the office of the governor.

MW: And there he was – waiting for us to meet and speak, being all supportive and thankful for our willingness to care for the beauty and the environment of Bali. He signed a promise to help the people of Bali say no to plastic bags. And we are now friends, and on a regular basis, we remind him and his team of the promises he has made. And indeed, recently he stated and committed that Bali will be plastic bag free by 2018.

IW: Also, at the International Airport of Bali, one of our supporters is planning to start a plastic bag-free policy by 2016.

MW: Stop handing out free plastic bags and bring in your own reusable bag is our next message to change that mindset of the public.

IW: Our short-term campaign, "One Island / One Voice," is all about this. We check and recognize the shops and restaurants that have declared themselves a plastic bag-free zone, and we put this sticker at their entrance and publish their names on social media and some important magazines on Bali. And conversely, that highlights those who do not have the sticker.

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MW: So, why are we actually telling you all of this?

Well, partly, it is because we are proud of the results that, together with our team, we have been able to reach. But also because along the way, we have learned that kids can do things. We can make things happen. Isabel and I were only 10 and 12 years old when we started this. We never had a business plan, nor a fixed strategy, nor any hidden agendas – just the idea in front of us and a group of friends working with us. All we wanted to do was stop those plastic bags from wrapping and suffocating our beautiful home. Kids have a boundless energy and a motivation to be the change the world needs.

IW: So to all the kids of this beautiful but challenging world: go for it! Make that difference. We're not telling you it's going to be easy. We're telling you it's going to be worth it.

Us kids may only be 25 percent of the world's population, but we are 100 percent of the future.

MW: We still have a lot of work to do, but know that we still not stop until the first question asked when arriving at the Bali airports will be

Both: "Welcome to Bali, do you have nay plastic bags to declare?"

Om shanti shanti shanti om. Thank you.