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Daniel Gruber, an English teacher from Hawaii, has just finished a cycling trip around Taiwan on his bicycle. What made his journey different for the thousands of other circuits around the island, whether on bicycle, scooter or car, was that along the way, he decided that he would collect trash, making his own very small difference to the problem of litter on Taiwan's beaches. During 12 stops that took him from Kenting to Taipei, then south again to Kaohsiung, Gruber called on locals and anyone concerned about pollution to come help him.

The events, publicized mostly through Facebook under the name "Re-think" (RE-THINK, 重新思考), drew a strong response, with 15,000 Likes so far for something that Gruber said started out more by accident than design. The final event was at Chijin (旗津) in Greater Kaohsiung yesterday, but Gruber says there has been considerable interest in maintaining the momentum, with a similar cycle tour held as an annual event and chapters of Re-think located around the island.

As a keen outdoorsman, Gruber has spent a lot of time on Taiwan's coast engaged in a wide variety of watersports. He also is a keen hiker and cyclist. All this activity has given him a love of Taiwan's natural environment, and a horror of the ugliness created by the vast quantities of litter that disfigure many of these locations. He wanted to do something about it.

"I grew up with a very strong-willed grandmother who owned a lot of property in Wisconsin. When we went walking, she would always take a trash bag with her. As a kid I never understood why she would pick up other peoples' trash ... I said, people are just going to throw more trash. You need to yell at them and tell them not to throw trash on the property. She always told me to 'show' not 'tell.' If you show people what to do and make an example, they will follow you. And

that is the philosophy I have followed my whole life," Gruber said, speaking in a telephone interview with the *Taipei Times* from a train station in Miaoli, where he was waiting out the winds of tropical storm Trami.

Gruber said that as a matter of habit, he would try and pick up trash whenever he was surfing, snorkeling, or hiking. A photo taken of him collecting trash on a trip with friends while snorkeling off the coast of Kaohsiung made a big splash on the Internet, generating a lot of comment. "People started contacting me and asking why I was doing that," he said. From this spark, Gruber formulated the idea of using social media to not just generate awareness, but to actually get people to participate in collecting trash. Together with Jason Huang (黃之揚), he set up the Re-think Facebook page and started planning.

"I wasn't going to let the popularity [of the site] fade away. I didn't want people just to push Like and then forget ... I wanted people to actually come to a beach for one to three hours. On the first event [on Aug. 11 in Kenting], we got a huge number of people to come out. It was amazing the dedication these people had to the island," Gruber said.

Gruber did not consult his Environmental Protection Agency or other government bureaus, but rather his Facebook followers, when he planned an itinerary of stops around the island where beach cleanup events could be held. There was a strong response from the public, culminating in a hugely successful cleanup at Yanliao Beach (鹽寮海灘) in Gongliao, New Taipei City on Aug. 18.

"At Yanliao, they sent one truck and a couple of guys to pick up the trash we had collected and sorted," Gruber said. "When they arrived, their jaws hit the ground. We had collected probably around 2,000kg of trash in an hour and a half ... They were very shocked."

Huang said the degree of government support had varied from place to place, but even those who provided the most support did not really believe they would be able to clear away as much trash as they did.

Liu Shih-ming (劉士銘), deputy director of the



Northeast Coast Scenic Administration (東北角海岸國家風景區), told the *Taipei Times* that his agency wholeheartedly supported organizations such as schools or corporations for beach cleaning and similar activities. "If they wish to show their concern for the environment through action, we are happy to give whatever support we can," he said. "There are quite a lot of such activities, and this speeds up the recovery of the beaches, especially after tropical storms, which wash up huge quantities of trash," he said. The Northeast Coast Scenic Administration was one of the more pro-active agencies Re-think dealt with, and was the agency responsible for issuing permits for the successful Yanliao cleanup, Gruber said that organizing the permits for the cleanups and for backup from sanitation departments had been a labor-intensive process. In addition, he and his team tried to follow up

on the disposal of the trash they had collected, using social media to check in with locals who kept an eye to make sure that sanitation teams did the right thing with the trash.

Gruber said that he is committed to keeping Re-think a grassroots movement. "Without any [sponsorship] money involved, we are getting people to take off work, travel around the island. Many of the people involved now are not even from the places where the activity is held. They are taking trains, they are buying supplies, spending their hard-earned money and time and I don't want to tarnish that," Gruber said.

Gruber said that in collecting trash, he is not criticizing Taiwanese for their sometimes casual attitude to garbage disposal. "This is an international problem," he said. Liu of the Northeast Coast Scenic Administration emphasized that much of the trash washing up on Taiwan's beaches is brought in by ocean currents and does not necessarily originate on the island. But for Gruber, where the trash originates is not really the issue. In the same way, he would like to believe that his being a foreigner is not central to the success Re-think has had.

"I would like to say it doesn't matter [that I am a foreigner], but I think it does. People in Taiwan like to talk about what foreigners are doing, whether it is good or bad. So the fact that a foreigner was seen doing something good without expecting something back, and it might also reflect a little bit of shame, that a foreigner is coming here to do these things," Gruber said.

"People say 'you should not have to do this, it is our job.' My response is 'Well, don't let me do it alone, because I will do it alone. The thing I am trying to tell people is that this is not just about Taiwan, it is about the world. This problem exists around the world. We can't wait for the government to do things. We have to band together as citizens and create a joint effort.'"

A new way of thinking about litter

Social media has proven successful in mobilizing Taiwanese to help clean up their beaches

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER



Top: Daniel Gruber publicizes his message in Kenting. Above: Public support at Gongliao was an eye-opener for Daniel Gruber. PHOTOS COURTESY OF JASON HUANG

What you may not know about your local prison

Taiwan's corrections system is reinventing itself as a hotbed for the arts

BY ENRU LIN
STAFF REPORTER

Taipei Prison (臺北監獄) could easily be mistaken for a school.

Its grounds are laid out like a junior-high school campus, complete with an athletic field, library and kitchen. There are classrooms, and Ah-gong (阿貢) — not his full name — is in one labeled "Sand Painting."

Ah-gong, from Indonesia, is among a growing cohort of inmates who successfully tested into one of the prison's art classes. For eight hours a day, he makes sand paintings that retail at the Ministry of Justice's (MOJ) online store for NT\$700 to NT\$7,000, depending on size and complexity. Ah-gong's latest piece — a black train releasing a trail of smoke — is large but inexpensive, since he is still a beginner.

You may not be able to tell. He has just brushed colored sand on to a small section of adhesive. Using a spoon, he is tapping off excess granules with an expert manner, as if playing the tiniest timpani in the world.

"This is quite delicate work," he says in Mandarin. "You cannot turn on the fan because



Inmates are shown in a "study hall." PHOTO: ENRU LIN, TAIPEI TIMES

then the sand will blow everywhere."

At the other end of the prison, inmates are in what the warden calls a study hall.

As in any study hall, there is a guy who's studying, a guy who's doodling and one who is about to fall asleep.

"Three days a week, we have classes with our two teachers. Monday is all free time," says an inmate surnamed Chen (陳, full name withheld to protect his identity).

He's holding up a blue porcelain object that looks like a cross between a crystal ball and a Faberge egg. There are goldfish painted over the surface, each with a baker's dozen of shimmering scales. "This took two months to make. Every scale is created with filigree metalwork," he says of his creation. "I wanted the fish to be 3D, but not protuberant."

Chen, who studies sculpting at Taipei Prison, is one of the facility's most expert craftsmen. The goldfish egg retails for NT\$20,000.

"We often bring in professional teachers," said Kao Chien-yun (高千雲), a section chief at the MOJ's Agency of Corrections. "But it takes a long time for a student to master a craft. That's why the most beautiful pieces are made by the gravest offenders."

FROM FOOD PREP TO THE ARTS

Since 2006, the corrections agency has been developing its "One Prison, One Specialty" (一監所一特色) industrial program, which launched with the goal of teaching prisoners career skills like food preparation.

But these days, the agency is focused on

growing its arts program, which has proven to be a near-perfect match for the prison system, says Kao.

For one thing, lacquer ware and other artwork bring in revenue, largely through word-of-mouth marketing. Profits support inmate upkeep and individual allowances for prisoners, he says.

The program also keeps prisoners occupied in a way that can be personally rewarding. "[Art] seems to be interesting to them, and if they learn the craft well, it cannot be taken away," he said.

Once mastered, art may allow inmates to drastically better their circumstances after release from prison.

According to the MOJ, one former inmate surnamed Lan (藍) had studied at a lantern-making workshop during his eight-year sentence. Unlike many ex-convicts who find themselves in menial jobs after release, Lan became a staffer at the Chinese Artistic Lantern Association (中華花燈藝術學會), where he is now a creative director.

Another inmate surnamed Tsai (蔡) studied oil painting and went on to found an exterior painting firm called Sinte (信泰油漆工程) after release. Sinte is a major partner of the Formosa

Plastics Group, and one of the few companies that has stated publicly that it is willing to hire former inmates.

As its latest experiment, the Agency of Corrections is reshaping the arts program to allow prisoners to interact with the public.

In 2011 and last year, the agency held public art exhibitions featuring works from prisoners in Taiwan and China.

The agency has also been adding performance arts courses to the catalog — classes like taiko drumming and choral singing. Earlier this month, a newly formed men's chorus, starring the top-ranked singers at 13 prisons across Taiwan, put on their first public concert at the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall.

"Logistically this was very difficult. We needed hundreds of security guards and roll calls on the bus and off the bus," says Kao. "But it was good for the prisoners. I also think it was touching for the audience. Some were family members who didn't know their relative could sing."

For more information about prisoner-made goods, visit www.shop.moj.gov.tw.