

Soap That Saves

Hotels partner with new nonprofit Clean the World to redistribute used soap and stop disease.

Monday, September 14, 2009

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As a frequent traveler for his sales job, Shawn Seipler often wondered what happened to the barely used soaps and shampoos he left behind in hotel rooms.

Quick calls to hotels in New York, Houston and his hometown of Orlando showed that they ended up in the trash. The managers' responses were given "almost apologetically," Seipler said, because they knew that the bars were going to waste and adding to landfills. But no one seemed to have another option.

Until now. In February, Seipler and his sales colleague Paul Till created Clean the World, an Orlando-based nonprofit that collects used amenities from hotels, sterilizes them and distributes them to homeless shelters and impoverished countries! . Now Seipler is executive director and oversees a staff of 13 people and several volunteers.

Clean the World found an enthusiastic response in the Central Florida hotel market. Hotels representing more than 15,000 rooms participate in the program. The organization estimates it has collected over five tons of bath products, representing about \$1 million in donations.

"We are preventing a major waste item for hotels from going into landfills," Seipler said, "but more importantly, we have an opportunity to save lives by recycling soap products to third-world countries."

The first drop of 21,000 bars of soap, about 2,000 pounds worth, went to Cap Haitien, Haiti, one of the poorest areas in that poverty-stricken country.

Soap is not manufactured in Haiti, Seipler explained, and the high tariffs on goods often make soap too expensive for a population facing high unemployment and an unstable government.

"Folks have to decide whether to eat today or whether they want to buy soap," he said. "The thing is, the lack of hygiene can cause just as bad effects as the lack of nutrition."

Without access to soap, people in third-world countries face acute respiratory infection and diarrheal disease. More than 5 million people die from these diseases each year, with most of the deaths claiming children under 5 years old. Providing soap and teaching people how to use it is a simple way to reduce illnesses and deaths.

Later this week, area hotels and Clean the World will celebrate the Million Bars of Soap for Hope event at the Orlando airport, along with local government officials and the Central Florida Lodging Association. The event will commemorate an airlift that will put the total donations! to Haiti at more than 1 million bars of soap.

The Orlando/Orange County Convention & Visitors Bureau supports the initiative and is providing public relations and marketing support.

"The hope is that, after the press conference, this grows," said Susan Lomax Greer, associate vice president of publicity with the CVB. "They've got a lot of support and it's a really great program."

The Peabody Orlando was among the first hotels to partner with Clean the World. Its involvement started during its pursuit of Florida Green Palm lodging certification, a designation that indicates the hotel follows certain environmental sustainability practices. A staff member had heard about Clean the World and asked Director of Rooms Marshall Kelberman if the hotel wanted to participate. The combination of reducing landfill waste and helping reduce global disease proved compelling.

"I feel really good about recycling and doing things to help our planet's sustainability, but emotionally this really feels good that your work goes to an intended target," Kelberman said. "This just feels really purposeful."

Since June the hotel has donated 455 pounds of soap, 232 pounds of shampoo, 315 pounds of conditioner and 159 pounds of lotion. The hotel also is a financial partner, donating money to help pay for the airlifts.

Introducing the program to hotel housekeeping staffs is not difficult, Kelberman said, and his staff enthusiastically took on the new duties. Clean the World provides in-person and online training and provides the collection bins. After guests check out, housekeepers collect their used amenities and sort them into the bins. Clean the World staff picks up the amenities on a regular schedule and reports back to hotels on how much they collected.

The soap is recycled in two ways. Lightly used bars -- about 70 percent of what is collected -- are sterilized in a solution and then treated with steam pressure. For heavily used bars, the soap is cooked to remove impurities and reshaped into 2-ounce bars. Residents of the Central Care Mission, a long-term recovery home for men, help with the collection and treatment of soap.

The environmental benefits fit into many hotels' green programs by diverting plastic bottles that would have ended up in landfills. Clean the World estimates that so far it has eliminated more than 4 tons of waste. Kelberman said the Peabody has saved money by reducing its trash haul. He said corporate meeting planners have also shown interest in the program as they try to plan green meetings and make socially responsible decisions with their meeting dollars.

With the program off to a strong start, Seipler is already making plans for expansion. He wants to set up collection programs in other hospitality hot spots such as Chicago, New York and Las Vegas, and have a recycling point on the West Coast that will allow for easier transport to impoverished countries in the Pacific Rim.

"We're getting a great response nationally," he said. "We know it will work, it's just a matter of getting the collection centers rolled out. Clean the World saves lives. It's absolutely proven."

For more information or to donate to Clean the World, visit its Web site at www.cleantheworld.org.



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