

Clean the World Saves Lives with Recycled Hotel Soap

by Andy Cingolani

During a recent trip to Haiti, Shawn Seipler sat at a wooden table on a dirt floor inside a house made of sticks and rusted tin, listening to Teresa's story. A curtain draped across the open doorway swayed in the breeze and shafts of sunlight coming through the sticks caught dust floating in the air.

Seipler, Executive Director for Clean the World, describes this event as a "moment of truth," all the reasons he co-founded Clean the World and the motivation for his mission fully contained in a single event. Established as a 501(c)(3) organization in May 2009, Clean the World partners with hotels and resorts to collect unused soap discarded by guests, recycle and sterilize it, then distribute it to areas where soap is nearly impossible to obtain. Teresa, a gardener in Cap Haitien, Haiti with five children and an elderly mother to care for, brought Seipler face to face with the impact of his work.

"Teresa takes care of five kids under 12," Seipler says. "But she had lost her first child, who was a son, to diarrheal disease. When she described what her son went through before he died – stomach ache, flaking scalp, dry flaky skin – I knew exactly what it was."

Seipler added that, had Teresa been able to afford soap and been taught how and when to use it, her son might not have died. "When I met Teresa, I met somebody who would have been affected positively by this program."

Seipler knows the statistics and recites them with ease: More than 3.5 million children die every year of diarrheal disease or acute respiratory illness. That's 9,000 children per day, every day. In fact, of all deaths of children five and under, diarrheal disease and acute respiratory illness combined account for one-third of those. It is estimated that 60 percent of those deaths could be prevented by washing hands with soap after going to the bathroom and before eating, but soap is scarce or prohibitively expensive in many impoverished areas throughout the world.

Simultaneously, in the United States alone, approximately 2.6 million bars of soap are discarded by hotels and resorts every day and end up in landfills.

Statistics, however, can be dry and impersonal, according to Seipler. "Sitting with this woman in this little village, it just really kept the fire burning inside me to follow this mission."

For Richard Scinta, General Manager of Wyndham Bonnet Creek Resort in Orlando, Florida, their partnership with Clean the World provides numerous benefits. This includes one that is specific to timeshare resorts: timeshare owners feel like they're part of the effort.

This was evident at an annual meeting of the Bonnet Creek Resort Vacation Condominium Association Board, held recently at the resort. At this meeting Scinta and his staff delivered a presentation, updating members on a wide range of resort operations and member services topics.

“We included our participation in the Clean the World program as part of our presentation,” Scinta says. “When we finished, the members responded with a big round of applause. They were so proud and happy to be able to help the environment, and help people in underprivileged areas. They feel like they’re part of the effort.”

Rosa Lopez, Executive Housekeeper at Wyndham Bonnet Creek Resort, adds that the housekeeping staff has been strongly supportive of the resort’s participation. “Especially with our Haitian associates, they are quite happy to be a part of the program because they understand the hardship of the people who are being helped,” she says. “Every day, we collect enough soap for two weeks worth of use for a single family.”

Scinta adds that the impact on the environment is also significant. In fact, Wyndham Bonnet Creek Resort’s partnership with Clean the World helped the resort meet the requirements of both the State of Florida Green Lodging designation and Wyndham Vacation Ownership’s internal Greening Certification Audit Program.

“We were actually throwing all this soap into a landfill,” Scinta says. “Now it’s going to help people. It’s something we’re really happy to be part of.”

Creating a process that’s easy and beneficial for its partners has been a point of focus for Clean the World. Once the partner agreement is in place, partners receive bins with the organization’s logo for collection. Every day, housekeepers collect the used soap throughout their rounds, separating it from the regular trash. When they return to the housekeeping staging area, they drop the soap in the designated bin. Clean the World picks up the bin and drops off an empty one on a regular schedule. Clean the World provides online training videos and educational posters to help make the process easier to assimilate.

Once the soap is delivered to the processing plant, heavily used bars are rebatched, a process wherein the soap is melted down and cooked to a temperature that completely kills any bacteria or virus. The soap is then formed into two-ounce bars. Slightly or moderately used bars are sterilized with a combination of steam and pressure.

To ensure safety, Clean the World had a lab infect a bar of soap with several common bacteria, including E. coli, salmonella and staphylococcus, then applied their sterilization process to the infected soap. The bar was then returned to the lab to test for the bacteria it had been infected with, and was found to be completely safe for use.

As an added benefit, Clean the World provides information and assistance to its partners so that they qualify for a tax deduction for having made a “non-cash charitable

contribution.” Partners receive quarterly statements with complete details on the amount of soap collected as accounting support.

Seipler views timeshare resorts as an area of potential growth for Clean the World. “Most of our partners are hotels,” he says. “And we’d certainly love to get involved with more timeshares as we grow.”

Ed Kinney, Vice President of Corporate Affairs for Marriott Vacation Club International, says that their involvement at Marriott’s Royal Palms, Sabal Palms and Imperial Palms resorts follows the direction set by Marriott International to be involved in programs that benefit the environment.

“If we have the ability to donate a product that has limited use or benefits, and instead repurpose it for this type of cause, it’s a win-win situation,” Kinney says. “And it doesn’t require much effort or coordination to participate in the program.”

Kinney explains that, because timeshares tend to have two- and three-bedroom units with multiple bathrooms, each unit may produce several bars of soap, creating a significant impact on the program compared to a hotel property with the same number of units.

“I think it’s simply good corporate citizenship,” he says. “We really embrace opportunities to make a difference in the environment. This is something that’s unique.”

While Clean the World is a company with a short history, the story of how it started speaks to the how the organization’s mission was formed. A year before sitting in that structure of sticks and rusted tin in Cap Haitien, Haiti, Seipler found himself in a familiar situation: sitting in yet another hotel room on yet another business trip required by his job as a Sales Director for a tech company.

“I was sitting in this hotel room,” he recalls. “Wishing I could find a way to spend less time traveling and more time with my family. I sat there holding a bar of hotel soap and started wondering, what do they do with this soap after I’m done with it? So I decided to ask around.”

Seipler and his co-founder, Paul Till, conducted a survey of 30 hotels and discovered that all 30 threw the soap away once they cleaned the rooms and that it ended up in landfills. From there, they started asking hotels if they would be interested in donating their used soap and received a nearly unanimous positive response, setting the process in motion to develop an organization dedicated to saving lives by recycling used soap. That process led to the formal creation of Clean the World.

Seipler says that his dedication to Clean the World has been further inspired by the two trips he’s taken to Haiti to distribute bars of soap, and spending time with the people who benefit from the efforts of the organization.

“When I sat with Teresa at her kitchen table, I had an opportunity to do much more than listen to her story,” he says. “I actually got to educate her on the importance of washing your hands with soap. I explained to her how the infections happen and why it’s important to wash your hands after you go to the bathroom and before you eat. This was new to her, and she got it.”

Even considering the impact Clean the World has already made, Seipler says this journey is still at the beginning.

“Every day, another million bars of soap end up in a landfill and another 9,000 children die. And, sure, the environmental benefits are very important, but what really makes the fire burn inside me is that we can save lives by what we’re doing. We have an opportunity to change history.”

Seipler paused, then added “It’s an opportunity for the hospitality industry to lead the way, save lives and change history.”