5 SMU students tackle community service by putting schoolwork into practice, reports KELVIN SAM

JANICE Yeo, Han Pingping, Jace Chong, Alvin Chia and Diana Chong are all active student volunteers. What makes them different from other student volunteers is their membership in SIFE: Students In Free Enterprise.

SIFE is a worldwide non-profit initiative that seeks to teach important concepts such as market economics, entrepreneurship, and business ethics. These concepts are often brought across by SIFE teams through educational outreach projects to better themselves, their communities and their countries.

Singapore Management University’s SIFE club provides a different spin to the phrase “community service”. By applying it in the social context, SIFE implements the idea of entrepreneurship. While serving the community by lending a helping hand to non-profit organisations, this club also aims to maximise its impact on the community by applying business and economic concepts.

Staying true to SIFE vision
The SMU SIFE team has been staying true to SIFE’s vision by rigorously applying their business skills to their project with ChaCha Cottage, one of the many outreach projects they performed. Founded by Angella Cheng, this non-profit organisation aims to provide single mothers or women in financial need with home-based work to sustain their families financially. Typically, these women are taught to manufacture products such as scented soaps and aromatherapy candles.

“For our project with ChaCha Cottage, we were hoping to improve consumer awareness of their products and a steady stream of income for these women. Together, we wanted them to achieve financial independence,” says Jace.

In the past seven months, these five SMU students have been working hand-in-hand with Ms Cheng. For example, the team recommended that ChaCha Cottage focus on producing beauty soaps which are less labour-intensive compared to scented candles.

Other business concepts included introducing improved distribution channels through the Internet and sourcing for bulk contracts instead of selling products at piece rates. Website design skills were taught so that the maintenance of the website could be done in-house.

Alvin also recalled having called up spas and massage centres to source for interested parties who wanted to purchase the products in bulk.

For the SMU SIFE team, this community service initiative goes beyond scented candles and business concepts. Its members see great meaning in what they do and are driven by a desire to do even more for the community.

“Doing this project has made me aware of the less fortunate in society and the need for us to show our care and concern for them,” says Pingping. “In helping them, I’ve also learnt that society may have neglected these individuals in spite of the constant talk about helping them. I feel that more can be done by the rest of us, to give back to society what we have taken from it.”

Getting the urge to do more
For Janice, the urge to do more began one evening while watching one of the National Kidney Foundation’s charity shows.

“Each year, during the annual NKF charity shows, the heart-wrenching stories of each kidney patient always affected me. But as with many, the impact of these scenes lasted just about as long as the event did.

“This project was particularly meaningful and exciting as I could apply abstract textbook knowledge learnt in class to a real life situation. There is definitely more to what I can do than dialling a donation hotline!”

When asked to describe her motto in life, Janice waxes lyrical, citing a poem that’s a personal favourite. “Some people see things as they are and ask why; others dream things that are not and ask why not. What the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve.

Apart from being an aspiring social entrepreneur, Janice displays a certain literary streak as well.

With the completion of their project, the team is looking forward to the annual national SIFE competition on June 18 when SIFE teams from tertiary institutions in Singapore will present their various projects.

If their team is successful, they can look forward to a trip abroad where they will present their project to their counterparts around the world.

Heart in right place: (From left) Alvin, Diana, Janice, Pingping and Jace see great meaning in what they do.