I drew priceless lessons asking for spare change

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THE heat was sweltering. The mission, daunting.

We were in secondary school then, and my friend and I had six hours to fill our tin cans with street-sourced donations.

As the sun got brighter, the faces of pedestrians passing us got darker. No matter how sunny our smiles were, they just couldn’t seem to warm the hearts of strangers.

We shook our cans, they shook their heads. We waved our stickers, they waved us away.

Then, one of the students we approached reached into his pocket and smiled at us. Finally, a donor!

But to our dismay, the small, round object he held out was not a coin, but a sticker he had received after donating to another group earlier.

Mention flag day, and you can almost hear the collective inward groan from students, not just street donors.

I remember asking my friend why we were not doing more meaningful things, “proper” volunteer work such as cleaning one-room flats occupied by the elderly, I talked about distributing food, or bathing bedridden patients.

EMPTY TALK

But perhaps, that was just empty talk. How many of us would really take the time to volunteer?

Most of us won’t. But, taking a tin can and hitting the streets is something many young people like me can do. And the charities benefit.

The president of the National University of Singapore Students’ Union, Miss Tay E Teng, said: “Money is what beneficiaries need most. Flag day is when students can do their part.”

She has been organising flag day for four years.

Student Liu Mao Sheng, 17, remembered being shoved aside by an annoyed pedestrian on his last flag day, but that has not put him off volunteering. He is even recruiting friends for another flag day event.

He said: “It’s the most practical thing for a student to do. You don’t need skills – you just volunteer to do it.”

Indeed, I learnt from that arduous flag day 10 years ago that you just have to take rejection in your stride. Some people will eventually donate, some even smiled back at us.

Undergraduate Darren Toh, who helped to raise more than $8,000 through a community involvement programme under Singapore Management University, found it a drag initially, but after that, “appreciated life better” and learnt how hard it is to earn money.

He learnt his lesson by washing cars. I learnt mine by asking for spare change.

When my friend and I returned our cans that day, we found out other groups went to watch a movie during the time they were supposed to be collecting donations.

Looking back, I can’t help but think that they shortchanged themselves.