Saying hello to a friendlier society

Three students promote kindness by getting people to say ‘hello’

BY YEN FENG

"HELLO" says a lot - and no, these three are not selling anything.

Students Andrew Zhan, Adam Teow and Eu Simin are getting Singaporeans to say the word as a start to showing kindness in their Hello Campaign.

They launched their nationwide exercise last month on a meagre $1,000 budget, and it has been no easy task.

They estimate that each of them must have said more than 1,000 “hellos” to strangers in the last two weeks.

Reactions have been varied. There were some who were “super friendly, the ones who stop in their tracks and ask what we’re doing - or selling”, said Mr Zhan.

“It’s not easy but after a few hours, something changes. ‘Hello’ becomes infectious - like laughter.”

He believes that inside every person “is someone who wants to call out, to connect with another human being”.

“We hope to bring out that person in everyone,” said the 23-year-old second-year business student at the Singapore Management University (SMU).

Working with the Singapore Kindness Movement, the three aim to sign up 500 volunteers to their cause. This troop will then set out on Orchard Road on April 11 to promote friendliness by - you’ve guessed it - saying hello.

In less than two weeks, the group’s Facebook profile has attracted nearly 700 members, following its two lead-up events this year - the first at SMU and the other at Clarke Quay last week.

But the three have also encountered cynics who have either dismissed their campaign as a waste of time, ignored them or, worse, hightailed it in the opposite direction.

That is a pity, said Miss Eu, 20, a student at the Singapore Polytechnic, because when a connection is made, it may lead to something meaningful.

She related the story of a 20-year-old Filipina who burst into tears after she said hello to her last week.

“She had just ended a relationship and was inconsolable,” said Miss Eu. “She told me that I was ‘the first stranger who showed me some concern’.

The pair are planning to have lunch together soon.

Mr Teow, 22, an SMU business student, said he had often been a loner in school. But he has opened up and expanded his social circle since taking part in the group’s activities.

“I’ve learnt to be more outgoing. This positive experience is something I want to share with other people,” he said.

Mr Zhan, who describes himself as not being a naturally friendly person, agreed.

He said that going up to a stranger to say hello is “an act of courage”.

SMU students (from left) Adam Teow and Andrew Zhan and Singapore Polytechnic student Eu Simin saying hello to a tourist along Orchard Road earlier this week. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

The Straits Times tagged along during one of the group’s exercises earlier this week.

Outside Tangs department store, the trio - armed with “Hello, My Name Is” name tags and cardboard cut-outs of “Hello!” speech bubbles - dished out random greetings to shoppers walking by.

They were met mostly with looks of bewilderment.

Mr Teow, who was dressed in a white shirt and black trousers, lamented that he had worn the wrong clothes, saying in jest: “Alamak, I look like I’m selling insurance.”

However, the group’s efforts were soon rewarded.

They had collected, in 90 minutes, the names of 50 strangers who said they would take part in their cause.

Not unlike Renee Zellweger’s lovelorn character in the 1996 movie, Jerry Maguire, the strangers too were had at “hello”.

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