

Wonders of Waste Bags

Ellen Teague reports on an innovative ecological livelihood project in the Philippines which the Columbans support and is the brainwave of a lay missionary.

BAGS – isn't that a great name! It refers to an inspirational livelihood and recycling project in the Philippines, *Wonders of Waste* bags. WoW is coordinated by Helen Mitchell, an Irish woman who went to the Philippines as a lay missionary in 2002, and together with a group of local women started WoW in 2006. WoW, which links care for the Earth with care for the poor, demonstrates in a very practical way how by simple gestures we can 'live' the message of the ecological encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

WoW began in Pampanga, a rural area a few hours north of Manila. With Helen's guidance, a group of women began to collect and wash discarded empty juice packs and experimented with making them into bags. They tried out many designs and shapes and learnt the hard way what worked and what didn't. Over the years since then, roles and routines have become more formalised, with some of the women collecting, washing and sorting the packs by size and colour. Once this is done they are passed on to the sewers who transform them into wonderful bags. These are

then passed on for further quality control prior to starting their second life in another country.

For many years three primary schools in Geelong, Australia have bought WoW bags for their Prep students to use as library bags. A group of 8 teachers has visited the WoW project on several occasions and spent time with the women who make the bags.

A network of volunteers in Britain, Ireland and other places, sell WoW bags to their family, friends and work colleagues, at churches, in schools and universities, summer fairs and Christmas bazaars. The international links are vital, creating new relationships and opportunities for people to become involved in working for justice for people and the planet.

In 2009, Helen was invited by Columban Fr John Leyden to begin an extension project in Malate parish, Manila. WoW rents an office in the Columban parish's social services building and many juice packs are collected in the surrounding area. I visited the Malate office four years ago, and the bags I brought back as gifts were made by Mari, a sewer in

Malate. Just seeing her name on each bag reminded me of her skill and what the project means for her and her family. Since then, I have regularly ordered bags and taken them to sell at Columban events, alongside books and DVDs.

The bags are very popular and stand out with their bright colours and good quality workmanship. I should say "workwomanship" because the bags are made by women. They come in all shapes and sizes. I have in front of me a small bag made out of 11 apple-drink pouches and a medium sized one made from 36 orange juice pouches. Both are flawlessly sewn together and trimmed with a coloured strap. They are strong and useful, especially the designs with additional pockets inside.

During my visit to WoW, I was taken on a walk through Area 9, part of Malate parish, near Manila Bay. My guide was Helen, along with two of the women who work with WoW. Helen, Edith and Marivic led me through a maze of dark and narrow alleyways, making our way over broken paving stones covering sewers. Babies were being rocked by grandmothers outside doorways and tiny children hung around the alleys, without access to fresh air, natural light or green spaces.

Edith and Marivic showed us their 'houses' – damp rooms without basic services where they have raised seven children between them, yet spotlessly clean; outside were hanging rows of empty drinks packs, pegged and drying. The discarded packs had been collected from the local school, checked for damage and then washed. The women had bought water – (all water has to be purchased for a community of over 5000 people)



Photos: Missionary Society of St Columban

to wash and to sort them, ready to be turned into various shapes of bags.

Helen says the project aims “to change lives one pack at a time” and this is slowly but surely happening. Each bag is handmade with the work done in a way which allows each woman to manage her time, her output and her income.

WoW offers much needed employment to women living in areas with few work opportunities available. In addition, all are mothers and need to be able to combine earning an income with the responsibilities of parenting. WoW works to fair-trade criteria and members are paid promptly, receiving a living as opposed to a minimum wage. There are a number of bonuses throughout the year and the opportunity to join a saving scheme which pays out at two key moments back to school time and Christmas time.

This has enabled some to break ties with moneylenders and also to have a little more control over their lives as they can plan what they want to do with their income. Some have added small extensions to their houses. One bought her first set of furniture after 17 years of marriage. Another got a set of dentures 32 years after having her teeth removed and another has visited her elderly parents in a far province for the first time in 15 years.

As well as providing an income for 12 women, WoW helps to care for the environment. Plastic is a big problem in the Philippines, it is discarded everywhere and among the many forms of plastic which clog up rivers and drainage systems are the brightly coloured drink packs.

Helen says, “WoW Bags has received a lot of support and encouragement from the Columbans here in the Philippines, in Ireland, Australia and in England for which we are very grateful”. In the Philippines there are good links between WoW and the work of Columban Missionaries, Sr Kathleen



Melia in Mindanao and Fr Brian Gore in Negros. WoW uses some of its profits each year to support the educational work of Sr Kathleen with the Subanen people. This enabled a young woman to complete a four-year education degree. She now teaches Subanen children in a remote community.

Currently WoW supports the travel expenses for eight Subanen girls who are attending High School. In 2019, WoW hopes to begin a new collaboration with the Negros Nine Weaving Project of Fr Brian Gore. This project offers a livelihood to skilled weavers in a remote area. WoW plans to develop a new range of bags incorporating both weaving and plastic packs.

Working in partnership with the Columbans and others enables a wider audience to hear the story of WoW, a story of hope and change for people and planet... one plastic pack, one bag, one woman at a time.

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