

Wee, the people

Jack Sim wants everyone to come out of the water closet and face the facts about our most basic needs

BY JAKE THOMAS
STAFF WRITER

Jack Sim is the head of the WTO. Not that WTO; the World Toilet Organization, a global group that seeks to address an issue that might not even be an afterthought for many, yet remains a pressing public health concern across the world: the lack of good clean toilets.

Much of the work of the WTO focuses on "ecological sanitation for the bottom 40 percent of the world's population." And addressing this topic in many parts of the world involves finding creative ways to work around entrenched social mores about what is considered a rude topic. However, finally tackling what should be an obvious public health issue can yield large dividends, according to Sim.

Although Sim, who worked for decades as a businessman in Singapore before turning his attention to the oft-neglected sanitation issue, spends much of his time thinking about toilets, he still has some concerns that overlap with the WTO, namely the economic development of the world's poor. Sim's organization has been working on a business model that he hopes will grow and serve as a vehicle of economic empowerment while also improving public hygiene.

Sim, who was in Portland to check out what the city is doing on the issue, has been recognized by TIME Magazine as a "Hero of the Environment" and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has also taken an interest in his organization. He talked to Street Roots about how toilets became his life's mission, how to start conversations about what many consider an embarrassing subject, and how he hopes his business-oriented approach will change how people



Jack Sim

PHOTO BY JAKE THOMAS

think about one of the most universal of human activities.

Jake Thomas: *You seem like an unlikely advocate for this issue, a Singaporean businessman. How did this issue come to your attention and why did you want to address it?*

Jack Sim: I was doing business from the age of 24 to 40, and each year I created an extra business, so by 40 I had 40 businesses. But then came midlife, and I started to review: What is life for if I'm just going to collect and make money? Is there a higher meaning? I started to think that I should solve some social issue out there, and just at that time the prime minister was complaining about the public toilets in Singapore. So I started the Restroom Association to educate the shopping malls, the schools, companies and factories that they actually should have better toilets because it's very profitable. If you don't have good toilets, people will leave the

shopping malls, and so they leave with their credit cards and cash and you lose a lot of business.

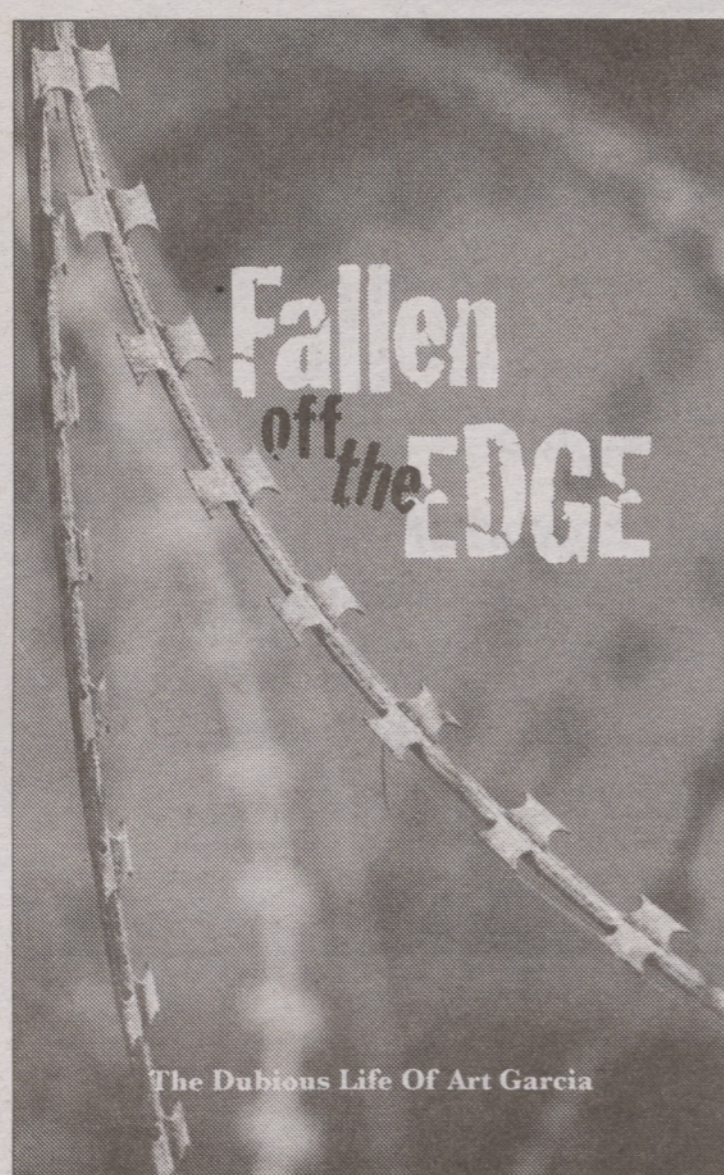
In schools, they told the principal that their children's marks won't be very good when they can't concentrate on what the teachers are saying if they're holding their bladders, and school vandalism and graffiti increase with dirty toilets, and that motivated a lot of school principals. And then we trained the kids to clean up their toilets and decorate them with flowers and animals and dinosaurs and celebrated the achievement so that they took ownership of the toilet.

We go to companies and tell them that when staffers are sick, you lost money; you lost productivity, and a company can have very low morale when toilets are dirty, and you might have high staff turnover, and they understood. So by explaining this, we incentivized a lot of people to change their attitudes to toilets, and then we brought in the Japanese toilet trainers to train the

toilet cleaners. A lot of people think that the toilet cleaner's job is the lowest and is unskilled, but it's actually a technician's job and you need to take pride in the job.

We recently started the SaniShop for the poor because there are 2.6 billion people, or about 40 percent of the human population, who do not have access to proper sanitation. We created a micro franchise to teach the poor to start producing factories for latrines. Each of these factories cost \$1,000 to set up, and then they produce toilets. They sell it at \$35 per family latrine, and we also employ saleswomen in villages who will sell the toilets for producers. They make \$2 on commission for every toilet sold and the SaniShop producer will make \$5 per product, so the cost is \$28 or \$25. Everyone makes profit; jobs are created; sustainable delivery of public health is done; and dignity and self-respect convenience is achieved. When you give someone a toilet, there's

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Fallen Off the Edge

A new book by Art Garcia

"Fallen Off the Edge" is a chronicle of one man's experiences after returning from the Vietnam War. Told through the eyes of Street Roots columnist Art Garcia, this book celebrates the major victories born from a series of questionable choices. Art's jocular storytelling takes the reader along with him in and out of the California prison system over the course of 10 years until he found the strength and courage to pull himself up from the fall.

The book is available online at www.blurb.com under searchword Art Garcia.

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