

Stevens Chan is Shining

the Light on Blindness in Malaysia

In 2002, Malaysian native Stevens Chan was diagnosed with glaucoma. He didn't know he had an eye disease, let alone one with no obvious symptoms, no cure, and which often leads to blindness. His vision loss occurred quickly. In just 5 years, he was blind. Stevens' experience led him to establish a Malaysian branch of Dialogue in the Dark, a social enterprise that works to increase public awareness around preventable blindness and support individuals with visual impairments. Stevens is far from alone in his experience with blindness. The World Health Organization estimates that 285 million people are visually impaired worldwide, and 39 million of them are entirely blind. At the same time, 80% of all visual impairment can be prevented or cured as long as people have access to the right information and treatment options. Unfortunately, many do not. Stevens is working to change that in Malaysia.

Launching Dialogue in the Dark in Malaysia

When Stevens became blind, he launched an art exhibit to inform people about the importance of preventative eye exams and remind people to appreciate their eyesight. He was determined to continue growing these public awareness efforts, and became an active participant in conferences and other networking opportunities.



It was at a conference that Stevens first came across the concept of Dialogue in the Dark. First established as an organization in Germany in 1989, Dialogue in the Dark has slowly expanded internationally over the years. However, it still had no

presence in Malaysia. With the help of volunteer supporters, Stevens launched the first Dialogue in the Dark in Kuala Lumpur in 2012.

Dialogue in the Dark operates using “friendchise” (as opposed to franchise) licensing. Creators of new locations use the organization’s name and brand, but receive limited support from a global coordinator. As a result, it is up to founders like Stevens to establish innovative ways to implement programs and generate revenue.

Go blind for an hour

Malaysia’s Dialogue in the Dark includes a number of opportunities for visitors to explore day-to-day experiences, dining, and art exploration in dark rooms that simulate blindness. Through these programs—including Dialogue in the Dark, Dining in the Dark, and Arts Beyond Sight—visitors can experience life without sight with the help of trained, visually impaired guides. These programs create employment opportunities for those with visual impairments and raise visitors’ appreciation for their eyesight. Visitors are able to better empathize with people who experience visual impairment every day. They also have a chance to experience life with greater reliance on other senses, such as smell, hearing, and touch.

Innovation to create a sustainable business model

Like most other social enterprises, Dialogue in the Dark does not receive financial support from the government. The experiential tours in the dark are a baseline source of income for Dialogue in the Dark, although it takes significant effort to regularly reach enough local businesses, tourists, and locals to be fully sustainable. But Stevens can’t rely on that income source alone. He has to regularly brainstorm and establish revenue streams to keep Dialogue in the Dark alive in Kuala Lumpur. “The program is very experiential, and so I’ve found that marketing can be very difficult,” Stevens explains. “The typical strategies for marketing don’t seem as effective for us. I feel like I’ve tried everything from a promotional perspective. We have to think outside of the box.”

Luckily, Stevens has identified other revenue sources that supplement income from the tours. Dialogue in the Dark guides and moderators give educational workshops at schools and universities. Furthermore, these facilitators also lead team building sessions in the dark at conferences and retreats for local businesses.



The revenue from these programs allows Stevens to help improve quality of life for people with visual impairments. He currently employs 15 visually impaired people on a part-time basis. In addition, he established the Academy of Light, a vocational training program for people with a visual impairment. Attendees can take classes in language skills, arts skills, and more. The Academy is one of the features that makes Dialogue in the Dark in Malaysia particularly impactful compared with other locations that only offer experiences in the dark. But Stevens won't stop there. He originally established a new entity, Disabilities into Dynamites (DID) MY Innovations, which owns the license for Dialogue in the Dark Malaysia. Through DID and Dialogue in the Dark, Stevens recently launched other social enterprises. These include MY Virtual Call Center, which trains both visually and physically impaired people as virtual call agents. Another, House of Light, offers virtual, online courses for youth. Is it 100% accessible for visually impaired students. Stevens hopes that these, along with other ideas, become self-sustaining enterprises. With profits from these ventures, he can fund outreach and education to help prevent unnecessary blindness in Malaysia in the future.

Words for the World

After every session of Dialogue in the Dark, guides ask people to reflect on what is really important to them in life. That's the same advice Stevens would give all of us as we start a new year.

"In today's world, everyone is rushing. Try to take a step back, regardless of cultural differences, and think about other people's perspectives. I want to inspire empathy for people with visual impairment, and a sense of harmony and inclusiveness. I want us to include everyone in society, regardless of disabilities. It will be a better world. Don't think of a disabled person as a burden, but as a potential contributor." To learn more about Dialogue in the Dark Malaysia, visit <http://did.my/web/> or follow along on [Facebook](#). Stevens can be reached at stevens@did.my.