

STARTING YOUNG

Handicap-friendly retro candy

Three 20-year-olds start a social enterprise that hires hearing-impaired staff, reports **LEE MEIXIAN**

ON the third floor of Bugis Village is a retro candy shop called "90s - The Candy Studio" that transports customers 30 years back with its offering of nostalgic snacks from Magic Dust Lollipops to Hiro Choc Cakes and haw flakes.

Step in and you might be greeted by staff donning lanyards that explain that they are hearing-impaired. These staff can lip-read what you say and answer your queries by writing on a whiteboard or notepad, or showing you flashcards.

This social enterprise of a sweet shop is the fruit of three 20-year-olds' labour, and the result of their partnership with pro-entrepreneurship retailers through their school, Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP).

Final-year business management student Robin Goh and recent graduates from the same course, Lim Yi Jun and Siti Khairunissa, opened the store in August this year, supported by NYP's collaboration with Bugis Street Management. Under the programme, rental for their shop is waived for the first year, so they only have to pay for utilities and wages.

This is extremely helpful in reducing their overheads, they say, enabling them to break even in just three months. Each of the three had put in an amount of "less than a thousand (dollars)" into the business, which also managed to cover shop renovations and furnishings.

The three have since re-invested their earnings into a second outlet at *SCAPE Underground. NYP is also partnering *SCAPE in encouraging young entrepreneurship by giving preferential rental rates to their students who set up businesses in this space. The trio say it looks like they are going to break even again.

They say they had weeded out many ideas, mostly related to selling fashion apparel in a bid to grab a slice of the market from teenagers who frequent the Bugis area, before deciding on this "more unique and meaningful one" in June this year.

Ms Khairunissa, now a business management student at the SIM-University London, says: "We settled for something closer to our hearts because we were all born in the same year and shared the same snacks and candies as children. Our target customers are youngsters our age or young adults, so they most probably share the same memories as us as kids."

Ms Lim, also a business management student but at the Singapore Management Uni-

versity (SMU), says that the declining trend of "mamak shops" (convenience stores) means that these sweets are becoming endangered. Hence their decision to bring them back for old times' sake.

The "corporate responsibility" dimension of employing the hearing-impaired was Mr Goh's idea. 90s currently hires one full-time employee and four part-timers, three of whom are hearing-impaired.

Mr Goh says he got the idea from seeing first-hand the difficulty his own hearing-impaired cousin faced when finding a job.

"When she (Mr Goh's cousin) does find a job, the pay is always lower than others - three, four, five dollars an hour. They are always paid in the low range." 90s' hearing-impaired staff are paid equal, if not slightly better, wages, he says.

"Actually the hearing-impaired are able to do many jobs, such as this one as it doesn't require any special talent... It's not a big issue if they serve customers slower because customers will understand," he says.

Not everything has been smooth sailing so far, however. While sales at its Bugis outlet is healthy thanks to the high human traffic, business at *SCAPE, which started on Oct 20 this year, has been quite slow.

Ms Lim attributes this to the outlet being relatively new, as well as the presence of an indirect competitor, Sticky candy, just across the road in Cineleisure Orchard. She thinks sales will pick up in a few more months.

"*SCAPE is also doing a lot of promotions for its *SCAPE Underground, which only recently completed its redevelopment from a carpark to a retail space," she noted.

Their profit also suffers from the low prices of their candies since store sales don't rake in much money. The trio are planning to circumvent this by branching out to e-commerce and corporate sales, where they can offer their candies as door gifts or even candy buffets at events.

"There is a bigger profit margin to be made there, because these people would order in bulk," Mr Goh says. He adds that they are planning to kick-start their expansion plans closer to Christmas, and expect better sales once these plans take off.

But, meanwhile, he is not simply resting on his laurels. He has been trying to channel business from his other self-founded business - JNR Entertainment, which provides entertainment services ranging from magic shows to balloon sculpting for events - by recommending his birthday party customers to order candy goodie bags from 90s.



PHOTO: ARTHUR LEE

While Mr Goh sees JNR entertainment as a complementary business to 90s, he says it also takes up a huge portion of his weekends, as he has to party-hop from event to event with his entertainment team. He estimates that his Saturdays are filled by about five parties each week.

Coupled with nine-to-five hours at school some days, several evenings spent helping his father with his ice-cream supplier business, and occasional trips to the candy stores, this barely leaves him any time to spend with his family and friends.

"My family sometimes tell me not to spend so much time at the shop since it is not as profitable as the entertainment business, but we started it together and it was not easy to come to this point, so I want to spend more time on it," he said.

A believer in troubleshooting and proactively solving problems, he says: "Time is money and has to be spent wisely. If any part of our business is not working well, we have to see where it's going wrong and counter it - be it doing more marketing or pushing for more sales. We can't just sit and wait for customers to come."

For now, as the festive season nears and the trio busy themselves with their expansion plans, they also have a special treat to look forward to.

"Our first pay!" says Ms Lim. "We are planning to pay ourselves for the first time in December as a Christmas treat!"

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- Co-owner Robin Goh of sweet shop 90s - The Candy Studio (seen here with partners Siti Khairunissa, centre, and Lim Yi Jun) on his idea to hire hearing-impaired assistants

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