

The office cleaning lady who turns waste into works of art

By Seshan Ramaswami

The Straits Times, Page 4, Section: OPINION

Friday 7 November 2025

691 words, 759cm² in size

386,100 circulation

The office cleaning lady who turns waste into works of art

Joyous in her art and personality, Ms Y has inspired me to look differently at my own work.

Seshan Ramaswami

It was a few weeks before Christmas when suddenly, a little paper tree appeared near the watercooler in the office pantry – cut out of a discarded brochure and decorated with quiet care.

Barely a month after, as Lunar New Year approached, an ad hoc art installation emerged, made out of spare red packets folded into delicate origami sculptures, brightening the same corner.

At other times, an empty bottle rescued from the corridor became a vase, filled with leaves and flowers picked up from around our campus.

These small, whimsical touches transformed an ordinary office space into a cheerful, ever-changing art gallery. No one asked for them. They weren't part of anyone's job description. They simply appeared – thoughtful, festive and free.

Their creator? A colleague I fondly call the vice-president, janitorial services, Level 5 of the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at the Singapore Management University. Let's call her Ms Y.

Officially, Ms Y is a contract worker employed by a cleaning services firm, not by the university. Yet in every meaningful sense, she is our team mate. She is the first to arrive at 7am. She has no work-from-home days.

Most critically, her work is a catalyst. She keeps our offices



Spare red packets folded by Ms Y into origami sculptures, brightening an otherwise nondescript corner of the writer's office area and transforming it into a cheerful, ever-changing art gallery. PHOTO: COURTESY OF SESHAN RAMASWAMI

clean. What makes her extraordinary, though, is the joy and artistry she brings to her job. Small gestures that touch the hearts of every one of us on the floor.

Catching me at the water cooler, she sometimes shows me a picture of a flower she spotted on her way in. Our interactions are like Facebook but face-to-face, Pinterest in person, synchronous Instagram.

What management gurus preach as "mindfulness", she practises simply, consistently and perhaps subconsciously.

As she moves through the corridor, she radiates good cheer: a wave from afar, a warm "makan oredy?" up close, even an offer to vacuum my office when she has time to spare.

She invents new ways to do old tasks, like lining a bin with newspaper so trash can be skimmed off without replacing the plastic bag.

Day after day, she transforms routine chores into opportunities

for beauty and surprise. In a university that prides itself on sustainability, Ms Y embodies it instinctively: recycling, re-using, and reducing with creativity and care. She is, in her own way, a practitioner of "ART GPT" – generative paper transformer.

What management gurus preach as "mindfulness", she practises simply, consistently and perhaps subconsciously. And in doing so, she reminds us that cleaners, security guards and maintenance staff are not transactional workers, but indispensable colleagues who make our daily lives possible. Recognised during Covid-19 as "essential", they too often fade into the background.

Ms Y refuses to – not by seeking attention or demanding recognition, but by creating joy. She was visionary enough to turn our humble pantry into her canvas. And in her example lies an invitation: each of us can shape our own canvas, in whatever space we choose.

Her example has inspired me to look differently at my own work. An academic life offers many wonderful opportunities for creative expression in teaching and research.

But Ms Y has shown me how to bring playfulness into the many otherwise mundane tasks: in designing quizzes to ease student stress, lightening the tone of routine e-mails, or adding small flourishes to otherwise mundane administrative tasks.

Just writing this piece about her has made me smile. And tomorrow morning, I'll look forward – as always – to her beaming wave and cheery "zao an" (good morning).

- Seshan Ramaswami is associate professor of marketing (education) at Singapore Management University, Lee Kong Chian School of Business.
- Finding Joy is a new Opinion series about the things that bring us satisfaction, fulfilment and meaning. If you have a submission, e-mail us at stopinion@sph.com.sg

