VALUES in ACTION

Peetniks bringing our values to life in everyday work

May 28, 2013

Going Solar

Jack Howell is a longtime Peetnik, who has been buying his coffee beans at the Peet's Lafayette store in Lafayette, California for years. About two-and-a-half years ago, on his routine stop to pick up beans, something caught his eye. The Peetnik behind the counter was pouring beans from the shiny Mylar bag (or "pillow pack" as we refer to them in stores) into a bean bin. Jack inquired about the bags, and learning that they're all thrown into the trash, asked if he could have a few. Little did these two know that this routine event that happens every day in Peet's stores across the country would set in motion a chain of events that would eventually help people in need over 7,000 miles away.

Jack Howell picks up Mylar bags at Peet's Lafayette.

Jack is a volunteer for a nonprofit called Trust in Education, a grass-roots organization that provides educational, economic and health care assistance to villages in Afghanistan. The organization's goal is to inform and enlist Americans to become directly involved in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, and to serve as a tie between Afghan villages and American communities.

Children gather around a small solar oven covered with Mylar from Peet's bags in a refugee camp.

Jack contributes to Trust in Education as the Solar Oven Project Director, helping to build and distribute solar ovens to refugees in poor villages throughout Afghanistan. He's an expert on the subject of solar ovens, which use the heat from the sun to cook food, and has even published a book on the topic. Buying wood in Afghanistan for wood fires is very expensive, prohibitively expensive for many Afghan families. In a country that receives 300 days of sunlight a year, it makes sense to use the sun as free fuel for cooking. A solar oven requires a reflective surface that can get hot enough to cook food, and it just so happens that Mylar, an extraordinarily strong polyester film, creates the perfect surface to create these solar ovens. The problem is that Mylar is expensive, and purchasing it wasn't feasible for this charity project. So when Jack saw the Mylar bags in the Peet's Lafayette store that day, he realized utilizing them was a win win – he was able to collect this material that Peet's throws away and use it to build solar ovens to

Prosperity

Clients at Futures Explored cut and clean the Peet's Mylar bags before they are sent to Afghanistan.

Volunteers apply Peet's bags to the solar ovens in Kabul, Afghanistan.

provide to villages throughout Afghanistan. This is an excellent example of 'upcycling,' which is defined as the process of converting waste materials or useless products into new materials or products of better quality or a higher environmental value.

Now, Peet's is a free source of Mylar for Jack's project! He estimates that he's collected approximately 20,000 bags already. He couldn't have done it without the help of Pam Jacob, a retail associate at Peet's Lafayette. Pam was instrumental in starting the initial process of collecting bags for Jack. In addition to the Lafayette store, Jack now picks up bags from Peet's Pleasant Hill and Peet's Alamo. He sent thousands of bags to the Kabul Trust in Education office last year, with an instruction booklet he put together that taught the Afghans how to cut and clean the bags and apply them to the cardboard solar ovens. And then, last summer, at a warehouse packing party, where Trust in Education volunteers fill boxes with clothes, shoes, blankets, rice and more to send to Afghanistan, Jack met the program coordinator for Futures Explored, a Lafayette-based organization that works with adults with developmental disabilities. She thought that the cutting and cleaning of the Mylar bags would be a great job for her adult clients. So Jack made a visit to Futures Explored and provided a demonstration on how to prepare the bags for use in the solar ovens. The clients at Futures Explored loved the work and are now providing clean bags to be sent to Afghan villages.

When Budd MacKenzie, the founder of Trust in Education, returned from a recent trip to Kabul, he said, "I'm even more convinced after this trip of the value of solar cooking. People are using them. Families that are learning about them are asking if we can provide classes in their villages. One refugee family said they're reducing their cost of firewood by 20 Afghanis (the country's currency), which is 40 cents. That's $12.00 a month, which is a significant cost reduction for them." According to UNICEF, the average Afghan makes less than $30 per month.

Why are solar ovens so useful and important in Afghanistan?

- Over 70% of wood fires in Afghanistan are used to heat water to make it safe for drinking.
- All bacteria harmful to humans is killed when water reaches 150 degrees Fahrenheit. The ovens can obtain 350 degrees within 45 minutes. If people use them for nothing more than to make clean drinking water, it's worth it.
- Solar cooking is smoke free. Smoke inhalation is a major health hazard worldwide, particularly for women, who do most of the cooking. It's the fifth most common cause of death in developing countries.

By the end of 2012, Trust in Education had provided nearly 2,000 solar cookers to Afghan refugees across the country. Jack's hope is to continue this partnership with Peet's, which strongly reinforces our Values of both Prosperity and Responsibility, to provide these incredibly valuable solar ovens to people in Afghanistan for years to come.

To learn more about Trust in Education and the solar oven project, visit http://www.trustineducation.org/our-work/solar-cooking/. To learn more about Futures Explored, visit http://www.futures-explored.org/.

Do you see the Peet's Values in action in your everyday work or area of business? Share your story with us by emailing communications@peets.com.
It could be featured in the Values in Action Portal series!