GREY DAYS
STORIES

CHANGE
CLEAN AIR BLUE SKY
“Grey Days Stories...” (Human of Air Pollution), is a series of stories that CHANGE has collected in the days when the blue sky turns grey. From the honest and emotional confessions of the characters, “Grey Days Stories...” will not only vividly show the polluted scenario of our urban life, but also represent the voices of our community with many incisive thoughts. They are the ones who realize the changes of our atmosphere, they feel it with every single sense of them and they were and are suffering, they tirelessly seek for the answer with the hope for a day when the sky will be blue again, they are the reflection of US ALL.
“Everyone needs to breathe, everyone needs their activities. When the air is polluted, it’s clear that everyone will be affected.”

So, from the smallest things, along with the series of community projects during the past years which he has participated in such as: “Garbage of Spring” (Hanoi), “Garbage of Saigon”, “Garbage of Hong River”, “Garbage of Nha Trang”, The Team of Fire Garbage Hunters from the bushfire in Hong Linh mountain (Ha Tinh), etc,... He started researching and became one of the pioneers to launch the product of “mini joss papers” instead of the regular ones. So that the effect to the environment of this “hard to quit” spiritual habit can be “minimized”. Everyone needs to change, but perhaps the smallest changes will result in bigger changes. And to change step by step, he hopes to create solutions for everyone. It’s almost impossible to immediately stop this long-imbedded culture of the Vietnamese.

Instead of the large-size joss papers which will take up more resources to produce and will create more gas, smoke, etc,... when burned. Now, the culture can still be preserved but with the “greener” criterion: small, beautiful, less smoke, more economical but also limiting the risk of fire. He does not aim to enrich this business but only hope to have enough money to maintain production and retain a traditional culture in the most civilized way.
“The visually impaired like us cannot see, so we have a unique sense of environment. God took our sight, but he gave us other senses. When I was young, Saigon was fragrant, everyday I would like to step out of the house to feel the fragrance of the earth and sky. On sunny days, I can smell the sweet and fragrance of plumeria flower, on rainy days I can smell the jade, cool and soothing in my lungs. Now the atmosphere in Saigon is different, I almost always smell the dust, it is heavy, stuffy, difficult to breathe, so I also limit myself to go outside.

The visually impaired like me hate dust because even though we can’t see it, we feel it deeply through our senses of touch and smell. So if you have the opportunity to go to centers for the blind, you will see that things are usually cleaned.

I spent 60 years in this alley in Saigon, back then my eyes were still bright. I went to school, my school is less than a kilometer away from home. I remember that the road was very beautiful at that time, with green on both sides. Every morning I go to school with my friends, and they go around this small village, so many memories. Then … every time Tet comes, I remember the feeling of joy when I was a teenager. The old alley appeared with longan trees spreading green foliage to cover the morning sun. Spring music was dimly heard. There were a few boys scooping up failed firecrackers buried in the pink corpses of firecrackers from New Year’s Eve. The smell of incense and firecrackers fused together into a very delicate and very busy emotion of Tet.

Then … ever since the houses, the streets grew up close together, the trees gradually disappeared to accommodate houses and roads instead. In the past, there were many trees in the alley, the children were busy playing in the afternoon, and now … I felt like the city was like a nest of fire ants, despite my longing for trees, my hands can only touch concrete now … and that makes me sad. I think every citizen earnestly want a better living environment. Finding out who made it, whose fault is it, is meaningless, unnecessary. What is important is how we get out of this environmental tragedy.”

A story of
Mr. Tran Ba Thien
We are always living so busy so that every passing day is the same as each other. And if no one warns, nor does anyone care, how many people will realize that the polluted air is gradually “invading” and threatening our lives? For Mr. Tien Dat, awareness of this issue has been ingrained and cultivated inside him for several years. And you, do you realize, little by little, the changes in everyday life?

When I was young, it was okay to wear a shirt for 2-3 days, because it was not dirty. Now, it’s completely different, even if you just go out for a short period of time. In just that short time, you will get surprised and concerned. If you have the opportunity, every time you step into another country, you will suddenly realize “Oh, the air here is fresher” or “Why do I always feel the urge to cough whenever I go to India?”. Only at that time, you will ask yourself and be concerned. Outdoor activities, sports, travel, and work are all limited due to immediate health effects. Only at that time, you will be interested in and consider the choice of transportation or protection methods.

So now and in the future, who can do what? And what could be changed?

“You plant trees around your home, you install air purifiers, you can restrict going out, restrict the opening of doors, etc. to protect yourself and your family, but they are all short-term solutions, none are the best! Through that, you are only affected by 1, but with people who have a lower living standard, they suffer even more... 100 times, 200 times more...

“When you are more concerned about your surroundings and change into a healthier lifestyle and environmentally friendly living habits, all that is for protecting yourself. Particularly, celebrities who have a great influence on the public need to raise their voices so that everyone can have a more positive view so that we can all achieve a peaceful and healthy life and future.”
This story was captured by CHANGE on the sidelines of the city, about a peddler like many other peddlers, struggling to make a living, toil and moil...

"In the midst of this vast Saigon, when the concrete now is more than the green. Finding a decent place to make a living now is even harder. Therefore, I often sell sweet potatoes on the corner of this street, even though I know about the dust, which is even more than before, I also get tired of passing cars but thanks to that, I can take care of 3 people in my family. What a life ...

Sometimes when selling the goods, I and other "colleagues" are also chased by the police, but I know that I'm wrong, so I just carry my stuff and run. It's their work, just like me, so I have to sympathize. I sell here in the evening, but not every day is fruitful. Probably depending on the God of Wealth, if I don't sell it all, I bring it home to cook away for my family to eat for breakfast, both economical and delicious. See how cool i am (she laughs).

Talking about health, it is true that from the time when I moved to this route, I got ill more frequently. I have coughed for months now, I have gone to the doctor and taken the medication all the time. To get rid of the dust, I bought this cloth mask, maybe 8,000VND. A good mask, 50,000VND is more expensive than 1 kg of hard-selling corn. Well, clothes mask is okay, I can simply wash it after use. This mask is convenient like people go to the battlefield with a shield, I can sell vegetables with a piece of cloth to fight. As long as my children can go to school."

Talking about her expectation: "I just want my children to have a good education. My husband will drink less, if one day he understands, he can help me to take care of our children and if that happens then I can bear everything. Now I'm just trying my best to take care of my health, but I don't really have the knowledge to say. For example, like this air pollution, I don't know much about what to expect ... "

Then everything eventually quieted down with the last line we heard from her. We didn't know what else to do but give her the masks that she "did not dare" to spend money on, just wishing it was enough for her to stay healthy as long as it could. Now people wear masks, no longer because of the silent danger of fine dust or air pollution, the problems are only actually concerning and prevented when they're tangible, like the Coronavirus. Then today, posting photos of this article, our hearts are more worried about the good people out there. While people are rumbling about air pollution or even the deadly Corona on the radio, here, right around the corner, she is still happy selling corns potatoes every day. I hope she can use the mask we gave her ...
EVERYONE IS A PART OF THE POLLUTION PICTURE
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A story of
Mr. Tran Nguyen Uu Dam

The story was heard by CHANGE from Mr. Uu Dam, his full name is Tran Nguyen Uu Dam. He is known as a visual artist with a unique voice in both Vietnamese and international contemporary art. His art was created by the “no-boundaries” method from traditional materials to less-heard software technology. All distances are often narrowed from style to feeling from both Eastern or Western, inside or outside the country. In the eyes of the artist, he created his own approach so that even if the subject matter is arid, it will also become rich and even if the subject is boring, it will also be colorful.

One of his hugely popular art products is the Serpents’ Tails, which uses motorcycle exhaust as an art material, directing the viewer to clearer, deeper impressions about the better environmental impact of motorcycle emissions, thereby encouraging environmental awareness and action of the community. “Serpents’ Tails” has been exhibited at many prestigious art centers at home and abroad such as Australia, Japan, Singapore and Taiwan, etc,... attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors. Particularly in the Ho Chi Minh City, “Serpents’ Tails” held at Galerie Quynh in May and June 2019. Also on a grey day, we were fortunate to have him spend some time discussing and listening to the artist telling his different mind:

“I did the Serpents’ Tails” exhibition on the topic of air pollution, my purpose is not to criticize anyone. I simply want to convey to our viewers the message that we are each part of the pollution picture.

I myself, if I use a motorbike to go to work daily, I was then a part of the exhaust flow on my way. Even if we do not drive, we also go by grab, by car, taxi, bus or if with great distance, we have to use an aeroplane, etc,... It is true that the slower we move, the more “green” the effect is, walking for example. Or the “greenest” way to travel to the US or Europe is by ship. The ship is massive, emitting very little smoke, but moving very slowly, it takes about 20 - 30 days. Rarely can anyone have the time for such a trip, despite knowing that it is “greener” than other solutions.

So, no one more than anyone, each is a factor in the overall picture. We cannot emit absolutely nothing, unless we hadn't existed. But we can choose and make better, healthier choices. I hope viewers of my work can stop, and think about the environment. Obviously, it's not easy to change, especially with habits. But do we want to be gradually “devoured” by habits? leaving the sky to go grey sooner or later? leaving nothing but traces of emissions?...“
“Born to coincide with the time when people's attention to air pollution increased, the community mural project at the community playground at the alley 33 lane 69B Hoang Van Thai street was positively welcomed by the people. In the past, the playground was grey and dull with not many activities taking place regularly. Now, the replacement of the colorful and meaningful wall panels has made the area come alive, it invites the participation of many people, especially the kids and the parents. According to me, the most impressive thing, contributing to the success of this mural project is the mobilization of the community TOGETHER to implement the project and organize many activities. ART is also further developed, going further into the lives of people with people UTILIZING the SPARE DRAWING PAINT to draw more new games on the field and HAVE FUN TOGETHER on them…”

Although only drawing and conveying the message and the project could not contribute by direct action to improve air quality, I realized that the most meaningful thing after each project was spirit and idea. Awareness of the environmental sanitation of people in the area has been improved. Everyone is much closer to the common space and actively draw more paintings, together they plan to plant more trees ... to improve the quality of the air, the environment and the landscape in which they live. But behind the proud achievement, every project faces many difficulties ... For example, it requires a long time in approaching, getting used to and finding common voices of the related people and the difficulties of weather conditions. At the same time, it is necessary to mention the concern of project developers and artists to create a painting work with content that is both suitable and makes the people happy but still satisfies the main purpose of the project.

“We project makers realized that before when we were young, everyone went out to play a lot, had more space to play with more physical and mental activities outside the house than in the house. And now, the public space in urban areas is getting narrowed. Not to mention right now, there's lots of cool stuff in the house like the internet, or video games, which makes people go out less often. And the public space and the mural painting will be direct, easy to understand and attractive to draw people outside. The public space is still there, we do not encourage expansion but simply make people use public space more effectively. The environmental significance of the project connected with air pollution is the question: Attracting people to the outdoor to have fun and improve physical health, but what does it mean if the atmosphere is not safe?”
Since then, my health has been different...

Ms NTTY: Yes, I’m from Da Nang, I have been here for more than 23 years, wow ... so fast. You know, not long ago when I bought this house around here it was very deserted, almost nobody lived here. In front of my house is a pond of water spinach, at night, I heard the frogs’s as well as the sound of insects. Then one person, two people, then dozens of people came here. You see, now her house has become a back alley, there is no space left to grow trees, let alone frogs to live!

CHANGE: Wow! So Saigon has changed so much, and what about you? Are you “much different from the past”? (I tease)

Ms NTTY: Yes, except for making a living, when I was only 8 years old, I started to have sinusitis, it is with me even now. So it can be said that I have chronic sinusitis, happens every 2 to 3 weeks. But every time I sneeze, or have the runny nose, or when I sleep the nose becomes congested and sometimes I don’t have smell. When going to the doctor, the doctor prescribes medicine to help me, but it does not go away completely. I have learned that sinusitis is caused by the environment, or from my body’s characteristic. But my body was normal before, so I thought it was due to environmental pollution, such as car exhaust. Every time I go home from work, my coat smelled like dust.

CHANGE: Why don’t you try changing other means of transportation to reduce dust, for example ... the bus is also a good idea.

Ms NTTY: I confess, the nature of my current job requires frequent movement. Given the frequency of traffic congestion in Saigon, buses or even taxis can cause me to be late for the meeting time, so forcing me to choose a motorbike ... I know that it will cause more pollution but it is my only option, I can limit it on holidays, but with my work, I have to... The density of cars is increasing more and more. Motorbikes, cars, aeroplanes, my house is close to the airport so I often see the aeroplanes. Every time they take off, you see the smoke everywhere.

CHANGE: So what will you do about sinus symptoms?

Ms NTTY: Ever since I knew the diagnostic method, I applied it often and found that it helped me very much. As for air pollution, I only have local solutions for my family, such as going out wearing a medical mask, while at home, limiting windows and limiting going out on the road on holidays, but a longer-term solution, I still do not know...
Somewhere, there is a group of young people, whose studying is busy enough, whose work is hard enough, and yet they still care for the environment, then they received 1,000 USD from UNICEF and SIHUB for further research on the solution to the current environmental problem.

“Briefly, we are 3rd-year students - students of Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Law. Naming each of us will take a long time, so everyone just knows us as BITPO. If we talk about air pollution, we think that not only my group but most students nowadays still care about the pollution issue not only because of short-term effects but also long-term consequences it can cause”.

We were staying in a dorm on the outskirts of the city, but we still feel the situation is getting worse. There are days until 9 am, no need for the app that measures AQI, we stand on the 8th floor and look down and couldn’t see the ground, which means the level of photochemical fog is very large. As young people, we want to do something to help the environment and make an impact, helping other people to be aware of this and to protect the atmosphere that used to be fresh. Well, as the little ones, we do our small things first.

It is an idea generated from the “frustration” of the whole group. Every afternoon around 5 o’clock, when driving from school to the city to work, it is not difficult to meet the special “traffic jam” in big cities like Saigon. It is also not difficult to notice that cars do not turn off their engine when stopping at traffic lights. Standing in the middle of the crowd, we endure all of the heat, the dust and the exhaust. Being uncomfortable, we then researched: how to reduce CO2 from the engine exhaust. The idea is a bit “crazy” to listen to, but it can come true. We came up with a way to make a diaphragm that minimizes CO2 from a motorcycle exhaust by growing algae and chlorophyll.

Thanks to the support and professional advice from many parties, including teachers from the University of Technology, International University and UPSHIFT Organizing Committee, we decided to go with this idea. Our project is currently in the process of material research and will soon be put to the test in the lab. The algae filter that our team is studying is special because it is new, feasible, cheap, environmentally friendly and easy to use. We hope that we can succeed soon so that people like us can stop being upset.” (Smile)
In the last days of 2019, we rushed through the fog to find the story of the "grey-time people", but not knowing whether it's a matter of luck, we all came to a pretty interesting lab. A place where enthusiastic, persistent young people are conducting research to minimize the impact of air pollution caused on children, led by Dr. Tran Ngoc Dang.

“Our project is fortunate to be funded by the National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED), and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) of Australia. We see, with the current level of air pollution, there are two measures, one is to minimize and the other is to adapt. In the peak pollution days, the only way to adapt is to live with “floods”. Adults like me can still struggle, but the children are a completely different story. In the story of air pollution, children are the most-prioritized group of subjects that need protection, because their immune systems are almost not fully developed, they are still very “fragile” to pathogens in the air. The whole country has 7 studies selected for investment and our project is honored among them. We started this project in November 2019, and it will end in 3 years. Although the journey is still long and arduous, we will not stop trying”, Dr. Dang shared passionately with us.

He then enthusiastically introduced us to the survey results which the research team collected from students in the city, and explained the methods that the team would use for analysis to produce realistic and highly applicable results. When asked about the solution to pushing back the “grey curtain” that surrounds us, he shared: “To reduce pollution, I think each of us needs to lead a more environmentally friendly lifestyle. Needless to say, at close distances, we can walk instead of using motorbikes to reduce emissions, or use public transport and plant more trees. If each of us just change for a bit and have better awareness, the community will be better.”
“I have been working in the field of atmosphere for more than 40 years, I can see that the problems of air and environment are often less concerned by society, less than the problem of water or waste. Because air pollution is lacking in visualization, people are indifferent because they can still live, it costs nothing for them to breath, so people do not care much. In life, only when it costs money or the cost is seeable that people will notice. Of course. Besides, in terms of expertise, atmosphere-related subjects are often harder to study, work is also full of challenges, and job opportunities are also limited. So not many graduates choose to “persistently” stick with this field.

I pursue this field because I realize that air pollution leaves no one, and its impact is much more serious than other issues. But because they didn’t do, didn’t eat, didn’t sleep, didn’t absorb, didn’t understand it, so few people pay attention to this issue like me. Every day, a person only needs to drink about 2 liters of water, eat about 2kg of food, but the amount of air being absorbed into the body falls between 50 - 60kg. People can fast for a month, stop drinking water for a few days, but no one can hold their breath for 5 minutes. Yet many years ago not many people cared ...

And now, only when the state of air quality has become more serious, everyone gradually feels uncomfortable, frustrated, showing insecurity in health, people begin to care. Of course, the causes of air pollution are partly due to the development of life and economy, but there are many other underlying causes. Therefore, I cannot be optimistic about the decline in air pollution in a short time. Saying that does not mean letting go of the solution. All of us, including from every individual to every business and government agency that needs to WORK TOGETHER and try to RESOLVE to CHANGE, change from the smallest, each person does their best: from changes in government laws, policies and plans to changes in people’s perceptions and habits. As for people like me, of course, I will keep on the dedication every day.”
I think I will use this quote for my small talk about the topic of “Air Pollution” today, like the way I often tell myself to encourage my heart and many other colleagues to not give up hope. It can be said in a romantic way that I think most people like to have a blue sky, clean air, a light and easy life & romantic sundowns. But some people realized that they have “slept” or remained indifferent for too long and ignored what was once beautiful.

You will not see how important the blue sky is until one day you suddenly see the sky turn grey because of the ugly polluted photochemical smog on your daily life. You will not see how vital the atmosphere is until you notice the abnormality in every breath and sight while your body is being hurt from the inside. You will not see how beautiful the trees are until the day we lose them all, leaving only the days of sunburned flesh while there is no shade to hide. You will not see how important your health is until you hold the “death-certificate” in your hand confirming that you will not live for long. Or you will also not believe in the warning of the doctor or the experts until you become the real victim ...

There are dangers that do not manifest in the immediate future, and you may think that they aren’t worth noting. From my viewpoint, that’s the way most people are, indifferent about environmental issues. Not to mention the belief of many people that gradually become “stingy” because they think that it can’t be changed. Money for a living is obviously important, but it is more obvious that if the air is not clean, all that money is worthless. I hope people around me will never let everything become “too late”. My philosophy on all things in life will always be “Do something”, that is, always have to do something, even when you feel helpless or stuck at not seeing a solution. Because only when I lift my arms and legs to act, the change can happen. No need to have far-reaching actions, just as simple as: Make habits for yourself, regulate what you can. For example, reducing the exhaust through traveling by public transport, turning off air conditioners, reducing meat, etc. Learn about good changes with scientific evidence from reliable sources, etc.
A story of Hanoi Green group

“We planted many fruit trees on public land, without barriers. If the breed is good, the fruit will be sweet. Later, when the trees bear fruits, we will hang on the sign of “Fruit trees are the blessing of heaven and earth. If you are hungry, please pick some to eat.” In the hope for a future where people trust and support each other.” And then, during the 2 years since its establishment, the Hanoi Green Group has been diligently, gradually greening the land of the capital with more than 1,500 trees. Gathering nearly 200 young people who have “big dreams”, every weekend, instead of resting or having coffee or iced tea, the Hanoi Green “special force” has been cultivating trees in community living spaces, such as schools, cultural houses, residential areas, health stations ... throughout Hanoi with the desire to increase the area of greenery, contributing their efforts to sustainable development.

THE “GREEN THINKING” IS NEEDED TO CREATE A GREEN SPACE

Mr. Nam said, “Hanoi Green group plants trees not for profit or reputation. We want each tree to bring real value to the people in that area. Therefore, once planted, Hanoi Green must always ensure good tree development, if the tree dies, it must be replaced immediately and we also try to limit the death rate in each project to a bare minimum. So we really need “green thinking” and a practical perspective. Every stage of the group's project is based on scientific research and practical solutions, showing from the stage of the breed selection, planting method to fit the location and the needs of people in that area. For example, for trees with large canopies, shade and sweet fruits, we often choose to grow in residential areas or schools, to create more green spaces for children to play. When there is shade, people can reduce the use of fans, air conditioners, this also reduces the amount of power consumption, making a very positive contribution to the environment. Where there is a need for landscaping, we will plant flowers. On crowded roads, we plant dracontomelum, which prevents dust as well as reduces noise.

IT’S NOT DIFFICULT TO GROW TREES BUT TO NURTURE THE AWARENESS OF THE PEOPLE

“What we aim for is not only the goal of 1,000 trees, 2,000 trees or 1 million trees (even though it is a dream) but also an education method for the younger generation, to help them understand more and love the environment around them so that they become more responsible in building and maintaining a clean and green living environment. The good news that we received earlier this year, is that, a mango tree that we planted, unfortunately, has “gone”, when we hadn't had the time to change it yet, and the people in the surrounding areas had quickly planted a new tree! We always believe that Vietnamese people love trees and like to plant trees, only the conditions in the city do not allow them to maintain what they like. So, as we help people plow the concrete, remove all the trenches, replace them with soil to have a place to grow trees then everyone will like it and have a sense of protection right away!”