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Travel agency with a heart

Heart Travel goes beyond sales, helping train needy to be consultants

BY YEO GHIM LAY

HEART Travel might look like a regular travel agency, with its colourful posters of holiday destinations and racks of vacation brochures.

But, operating from a space in Ang Mo Kio, it does not just sell holiday packages: It also trains needy Singaporeans to be travel consultants, though they may have neither prior experience in the field nor the expected educational qualifications for the job.

Heart Travel, the first "social enterprise" in this field, hopes these individuals can find work in other travel agencies after about six months on the job.

Having faced problems landing jobs, Heart's employees were referred to it by the community club. They are spending six months working at Heart, selling and promoting holiday packages to customers.

Mr Sam How, 41, general manager of Heart Travel, said: "We want to provide a comprehensive training ground for these people and help them make a living at the same time."

Mr How himself worked in the travel agency industry for more than eight years.

Saying that Heart creates a win-win situation, he added: "Not only do we help the needy find a job, we also provide staff for other travel agencies who are reluctant to hire inexperienced people."



Heart Travel general manager Sam How (left) with Mr Susheel Rai, who joined the agency after a six-month fruitless job search. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Heart Travel was set up in May by Mr Samson Tan, 41, chief executive officer of GTMC Travel, a travel services provider based here. It has about 20 offices worldwide.

Heart, which cost about \$50,000 to set up, was funded by a pool of investors. It occupies a 500-sq-ft office on the ground floor of Teck Ghee Community Club in Ang Mo Kio Avenue 10.

Community club management committee chairman Noelene De Foe, who heard about the agency from Mr Tan, offered the use of the space at a rental rate of \$2 per sq ft.

Three of the six staff at Heart are needy residents with no prior experience in travel services. Two are training to be travel consultants while the third is working on being the agency's permanent information technology and computer administrator.

The travel-consultant trainees are paid \$800 a month, a rate which Mr How said is comparable to what travel agencies pay new-

comers with no educational qualifications in tourism.

Mr Susheel Rai, 26, joined Heart Travel after a futile six-month search for a job. He maintains the travel agency's computer database and doubles up as a travel consultant.

Mr Rai, who has O-level qualifications and is studying part-time for a diploma in information technology, said he could not find a job that allowed him to also go for his night classes.

At Heart Travel, he starts work at 10am and leaves earlier on those evenings that he has classes. He makes up for this by working extra hours on Saturday or Sunday.

"The company is not as rigid as other employers, and I am happy at being given this opportunity to work while I continue studying," said Mr Rai, who is supporting his mother and wife.

Mr Tan and Mr How hope to expand Heart Travel to cover five more districts in five years' time.

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