

**SPIRITUAL GROWTH**

Four South African Zulu volunteers with the Taiwan-based Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation study agricultural techniques in Yunlin County on Wednesday.

PHOTO: CHAN SHIH-HUNG, TAIPEI TIMES

Subkarma brothers give back to the community

TGI MONDAY: Fifteen years after Tony Soames arrived, he and his brother James own a branding and design company that is helping the country define its identity

BY **SHELLEY HUANG**
STAFF REPORTER

For many, Mondays are something to be endured. But for James and Tony Soames, owners of the branding and design company Subkarma, kicking off the week is something they look forward to.

Fifteen years ago, Tony Soames accepted an invitation from a Taiwanese-English friend to come to Taiwan.

"I met him [the friend] in sixth form — in UK we don't say 'high school' — and he just said, 'Hey, how about coming out [to Taiwan]?' " Tony said.

The two brothers arrived together, but only one of them returned to the UK after their two-week vacation ended.

"I had no idea where Taiwan was, did no research before we came over," Tony said in an interview with the *Taipei Times*. "Just came here and that's it, never went back."

He was 19 years old at the time.

"A month later I met my wife, so she was the main reason why I decided to stay," he said.

At first, Tony did small designing jobs. But one day, his boss walked up and asked him, "Hey, if you like what you do, why don't you start your own business?"

So he did.

"In 2002, I set Subkarma up properly as a company limited, with full design services, and James joined me in 2004," Tony said. "We've enjoyed every minute."

In the beginning, Subkarma was only a design company, but it has grown into a company with 23 employees that offers branding consultancy, commercial design, product design, Web design, advertising and market research and analysis.

"We really love what we do," James said. "It's not a job for us. Sometimes it is because you have to have deadlines and pressure, but actually it's not a nine-to-five job. On the weekend, we look forward to Monday."

The two brothers say that although not all of their projects make money, they are trying to give back to the Taiwanese community.

Many of Subkarma's projects are about promoting and branding Taiwan as a country. One of their current projects, "We are Taiwan," invites businesses and individuals

to select photographs of Taiwan from Subkarma's photo bank and print the pictures on the backs of their business cards, much like a small postcard.

"I came out here with absolutely nothing. Now I'm married, my daughter is half-Taiwanese, our customers are mainly Taiwanese, so everything we ever got came from Taiwan," Tony said.

The two brothers say that they believe Taiwan is "a nation of survivors." But in the sense of branding, Taiwanese "have to have a consensus on what the country stands for, what the strengths are, and how to promote the country as a whole," Tony said.

"A lot of [the] success of Taiwan is going to depend on how we read Taiwan in the international market," said James. "Foreigners have a high responsibility to build up an image of Taiwan."

"Taiwan needs to have a sense of identity before we can start creating the Taiwan brand," he said. "If Thailand says, 'We're the country of a million smiles,' well, people have to smile, right?"

When asked why the company was named Subkarma, Tony said: "Actually, Subkarma has no meaning... It just sounded good."

Having graduated from the Blake College of Arts, Tony studied art most of his life.

"I'm not the biggest business person. I got the company as big as I thought we could go. [In the second year we had] 12 people, a full schedule, lots of delays and we were losing money every month, even with a full schedule, which didn't make sense," Tony said. "So I called James."

James, 18 months older than Tony, had graduated from the European Business School of London. His two-week trip came just before graduation. James returned two years later to study Mandarin, but at the time he did not plan on staying for good.

"I thought studying Chinese would be a good way of increasing my skills and opportunities for a job, but my idea was always that I would go back to find a job in Europe," he said.

A few years later, James went back to London to work at Mars Foods, a company that markets foods and drinks under major brands such as Snickers, M&M's and Skittles.

James was in charge of sales



James Soames, left, and Tony Soames discuss their lives in Taiwan during an interview with the *Taipei Times* on Nov. 17.

PHOTO: WANG MIN-WEI, TAIPEI TIMES

"I think it's time for people to wake up and discover what the Taiwan identity is. There's too much infighting, too much politics. It's distracting from the economic progress of Taiwan."

— James Soames, co-owner of Subkarma

adoption, which allowed him to travel to many parts of Europe, and part of his job was to convince the heads of branch offices to adopt similar sales strategies.

Prior to Subkarma, James had worked in big companies almost all his life, while both his parents and his brother owned their own businesses or worked for themselves.

"Only me, working for a company with 45,000 people. And when you work in a big company, it's always about politics," he said.

When Tony called him in 2004 to ask if he wanted to help him run Subkarma, James accepted.

James said that what he had learned helped him "get change in a company," which he said was important to his role at Subkarma, now that he looks back on the experience.

"When you do branding, one of the biggest challenges in Taiwan is getting people internally in a company to change the way they work," he said.

"[For companies] that don't do branding, you have to think different, work different, use different tools. And in Taiwan, when you have 100 employees who've been there for 10, 20 years, it's very difficult [to get them to change]," he said. "[It may be even more difficult] to get the boss to change."

When asked about the division of labor, Tony said "[James] runs the business and I run the design... He does the clever things, I do

the fun things."

"[Tony] has a lot of creative ideas, and I say, [can] we do it or not? I try to slow it down a little bit, and it works well," James said.

The two brothers say they don't get involved in politics, but that they "love Taiwan."

"Everybody should love Taiwan, no matter green or blue," James said.

Subkarma has received a lot of invitations to go to China for business, but the two brothers say they choose not to be in China because "it doesn't make any sense to help our competitors in China," Tony said.

He said a lot of companies in Taiwan want to compare themselves to companies in China, but "it's not about being better than China, it's about being as good as Japan or Italy or Germany."

James hopes that one day, Taiwan will not be about "I'm better than..." but rather, "I'm different."

"I think it's time for people to wake up and discover what the Taiwan identity is. There's too much infighting, too much politics. It's distracting from the economic progress of Taiwan," he said. "There's nothing wrong with linking stronger ties with China, for example. There's great opportunity in the Chinese market. There's nothing wrong with embracing preferential ties that are being developed now, and also nothing wrong with being proud of Taiwan."

ACC head Scott Robinson works to bridge cultures

BY **JENNY W. HSU**
STAFF REPORTER

Innovation, a pioneer spirit, openness to new ideas, willingness to take risks, immigration and diversity are some of the things Scott Robinson quickly rattled off when asked to define American values and culture.

Robinson embodies many of the characteristics he mentioned. Hailing from Santa Monica, California, the blue-eyed former baseball player followed his passion for performing arts and became an actor after obtaining a master's degree in theater from University of California, San Diego.

When he was not waiting tables or doing other odd jobs, Robinson got involved in small film projects and at times played roles at the Shakespearean Festival in Utah.

The unpredictable travel and work schedule finally started to wear him down and after eight years of nomadic living, Robinson pursued a different dream — law school.

Robinson took up the challenge by working for three years as a paralegal at a New York law firm, where he developed yet another dream — joining the US Foreign Service.

The fulfillment of that goal has taken him and his young family to India and Beijing.

Now, Robinson is embarking on another dream as a public diplomat for his country as head of the American Culture Center (ACC), a division under the Public Affairs Section at the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT).

"The ACC is best defined as a source of information," he said in an interview with the *Taipei Times*, pointing to the wall-to-wall shelves lined with books, audio-visual materials and popular US periodicals such as *The New Yorker* and *Time*.

The ACC houses an information

resource center that contains Taiwan's largest collection of reference materials on an array of subjects such as US history, government, tax codes and individual state laws, Robinson said.

Those who like to keep their finger on the latest happenings in the US or have a keen interest in certain topics can also sign up to receive articles on the subject electronically, he said.

The library, free of charge and open to the public by appointment only, is mostly frequented by students, academics and researchers who need the most up to date information on US society or government, Robinson said.

Students who aspire to study in the US can also take advantage of the ACC to access information about school applications and facts about US institutions, as well as other academic opportunities presented by the American International Education Foundation.

The multi-purpose room to the side of the library ACC holds "American Classroom" — a program in which the public can attend lectures and discussions led by US or Taiwan speakers, usually accompanied by a film, on various social and cultural issues.

Robinson is also in charge of outreach programs, where AIT officers visit schools to give presentations on US-related topics such as the new president-elect.

"As a general theme, the election right now is our top priority. It is a source of curiosity for people in Taiwan. We have enlisted all of AIT to help us explain the election to Taiwan," he said in October, adding that a group of 25 AIT officers, including the chief of the political section and deputy director, traveled around the country to speak on the US electoral system and the tenets of the presidential race.



Scott Robinson, director of the American Cultural Center, speaks with the *Taipei Times* on Oct. 15 at the center in Taipei.

PHOTO: CHANG CHIA-MING, TAIPEI TIMES

Various speakers, ranging from political science professors to political commentators and pundits all contributed to the program by speaking to Taiwanese in person or via Webcast.

The ACC also serves as a conduit for cultural exchanges between Taiwan and the US by bringing some of the best-known US performing arts troupes to Taiwan, such as the Paul Taylor Dance Company. The center has also brought over smaller groups such as the Battery Dance Company and the American Performing Arts Academy.

The point of all this, Robinson said, is to give people a broader view of the US culture than what they see in Hollywood films.

But most importantly, Robinson said, his job is to foster understanding between two cultures that share the common beliefs in human rights and democracy.

"It is hard to compare the two cultures, but something I really admire about Taiwan is the friendliness and the openness of the people. The idea to be able to live in a democracy is really quite profound," he said.

More information on the latest programs offered at ACC is available at www.ait.org.tw.

Pag-IBIG reaches out to overseas Filipino workers

STAFF WRITER, WITH CNA

Philippine workers who dream of owning a decent and affordable house can realize their dream with the help of Pag-IBIG, the fund's deputy CEO said in Taipei on Sunday.

"The government is looking at helping overseas Filipino workers [OFWs] in Taiwan to buy houses in the Philippines," Jaime Fabiana said.

A Housing Fair was held on Sunday at the Dominican School in Taipei, the first of its kind organized outside the Philippines by the Manila Economic and Cultural Office (MECO) and Pag-IBIG Fund.

The Housing Fair is a coordinated effort by government agencies such as Pag-IBIG Fund, the Landbank of the Philippines (LBP), the Philippine Health Insurance Corp and the Philippine Labor and Employment Office, MECO said. Pag-IBIG is one of the Philippine government's leading housing agencies.

Fabiana said that many OFWs dream of building a new house for their loved ones.

"We hope to help make their dream come true by hosting this Housing Fair in Taipei," Fabiana said. "We provide housing loans at rates as low as 6 percent."

"I think the interest rates for the housing loans are quite low," said Silva Moonyen Ortiz, a Filipina who has been working in Taiwan for three years.

MECO estimates there are about 85,000 Filipinos in Taiwan working hard to provide for their families in the Philippines.

Pag-ibig Fund is Manila's Home Development Mutual Fund, created in 1978 to offer savings schemes and housing loan packages. It includes an overseas program, which offers OFWs, immigrants and naturalized citizens an opportunity to save for the future and to access a housing loan of as much as 2 million Philippine pesos (US\$41,200).



Tainan Mayor Hsu Tain-tsair, second right, receives a donation from Netherlands Trade and Investment Office Representative Menno Goedhart, second left, during a press conference on Friday.

PHOTO: HUNG JUH-CHIN, TAIPEI TIMES

NTIO donates festival profit to Tainan charity

GIVING: After this year's Holland Day celebration in Tainan, the Netherlands Trade and Investment Office representative gave away the event's proceeds

STAFF WRITER

Netherlands Trade and Investment Office (NTIO) Representative Menno Goedhart returned to Tainan City on Friday, where he donated the proceeds from the NTIO's Holland Days in Tainan — which ran from Oct. 17 to Oct. 19 — to a Tainan City Government education project for disadvantaged children.

Goedhart gave NT\$350,000 in proceeds to the Tainan government project, saying that although the festival brought a lot of happiness and joy, it was of even greater significance that the proceeds could help in the education of Tainan's disadvantaged children.

Tainan Mayor Hsu Tain-tsair (許添財) thanked him for the gift

and said the donation "came at a good moment."

Hsu also suggested that Tainan residents include the Netherlands in their itinerary if they were planning to travel to Europe, adding that visa applications were convenient and that the country was very friendly toward Tainan.

In the six years since Goedhart started at the NTIO, he has made a great effort to promote cultural exchanges between the Netherlands and Tainan, Hsu said.

For the past two years Goedhart had cooperated with the Tainan City Government to organize the Holland Days activities, Hsu said.

The event attracted almost 60,000 visitors this year.

Goedhart said he felt that NT\$350,000 was not enough and vowed to increase the scope of Holland Days activities next year and raise NT\$500,000 so that even more of Tainan's disadvantaged children could be given assistance.