

Artist's impression of Kampung Kampus



Ground-Up Initiative founder Tay Lai Hock (far left) and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam (fifth from left) with GUI staff, volunteers and grassroots leaders at the ground-breaking ceremony yesterday. The non-profit group's eco-friendly site will be ready in about two years' time.

PHOTO: GROUND-UP INITIATIVE

Eco-friendly site to take root in Khatib

From Silicon Valley to Wow Kampung

Non-profit group secures plot for project to nurture leaders and build kampung spirit.

David Ee

A non-profit group that has drawn thousands of volunteers with its philosophy of living in harmony with the earth and people, now has a larger space to do even more. Ground-Up Initiative (GUI) has secured 26,000 sq m of land at the former Bottle Tree Park in Khatib for what it calls a "Kampung Kampus", to nurture leaders through urban farming, craftsmanship, arts and heritage, and to build a kampung spirit.

When it is ready in about two years' time, the eco-friendly site will include organic farming plots, camping grounds, an amphitheatre, a heritage centre and a prototyping zone for people to design useful technologies such as solar lamps. The project is expected to cost GUI \$6 million, which it hopes to raise from government grants and by offering its popular educational programmes to schools and corporations. The group has 12 full-time staff and has attracted 35,000 volunteers since 2008 to help with farming, composting, carpentry workshops and making organic food, among other activities. It had earlier looked as if GUI would have to move from its

rent-free base in the former Bottle Tree Park, after the lease secured by the supportive former management expired this year. But the group has been thrown a lifeline: Chong Pang Citizens' Consultative Committee (CCC) is leasing the land from the Government for community use for six years, and is subletting it to GUI at a "very soft rental", said Minister for Foreign Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam, an MP for Nee Soon GRC, at the site's ground-breaking ceremony yesterday. GUI founder Tay Lai Hock told reporters that the group is paying a monthly rent of "close to five figures". Mr Shanmugam said that to help keep the rental low, Chong Pang CCC offered to become the



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tenant on the basis that the area would be used for community projects.

He said that while letting the non-profit group use the site would mean less income is earned, and there were competing uses for the land, "you can't put a money value" on how GUI's work benefits people. "We were impressed because of the amount of energy and enthusiasm that young people show for this," Mr Shanmugam said. "Beyond looking at things from a commercial perspective, it brings people very much in touch with something that they yearn for in an urban environment like Singapore - nature, doing things with your hands, a spirit of self-reliance." Mr Tay said: "In the past six years, I have seen so many families and young people come up to me to thank me for building a space

like this. It provides a breathing space and safe place for many to experience their sense of purpose and empathy for Singapore, the earth and humanity. It makes us feel like human beings again." The former Bottle Tree Park had restaurants and a fishing pond, with tenants paying monthly rents of about \$15,000. The remaining land there will be leased by China-based Fullshare Group, which secured the lease in July with a tender bid of \$169,000 a month. The company, which invests in health care and international trade businesses in Singapore, is expected to turn the area into a leisure park attraction, with restaurants and activities such as camping and fishing.

All his staff call him the "kampung chief", and he certainly looks the part. Mr Tay Lai Hock, the grizzled, grey-haired founder of Ground-Up Initiative (GUI), prefers to go barefoot when walking around the group's base at the former Bottle Tree Park in Khatib. But the energetic 51-year-old has a more alien past. He was a successful sales and marketing executive for 11 years, working for a Silicon Valley-based employer in the United States and earning a five-figure monthly salary. He gave it all up in the early 2000s to travel the world for four years. Enroute, he lived in organic farms and eco-villages in Spain, Morocco and New Zealand, and was inspired to begin something similar in Singapore. GUI started in 2008 with just a

handful of members. Over time, its "village" base at the former Bottle Tree Park - granted rent-free by the supportive management - grew into 7ha of farming plots, fruit trees and a workshop. Today, the ragtag outfit is no more. It has expanded quickly as schools and firms were attracted to its educational programmes that emphasise connecting with nature, the earth and people. It now has an innovation arm, a social enterprise called Sustainable Living Lab, to add to its educational arm known as Wow Kampung. Its volunteers hail from Singapore and around the world, and include civil servants, social workers, chefs and bank executives. Last year, Mr Tay was given an Inspiration Of The Year award from global think-tank Challenge:Future. David Ee

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