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Honolulu couple take “leap of faith” to aid local homeless by offering free showers through their mobile hygiene center

Specialty mobile trailer is equipped with three private baths, each offering a shower, sink and toilet. ADA-compliant chamber uses Sanibest Pro heavy-duty grinder system from Saniflo to pump away black and grey water from the three fixtures.

HONOLULU — Danica Fong-Shoji and her husband Craig Shoji count themselves as “just regular people.” But they routinely do something quite extraordinary — not just once in a while, but several times a month — by way of caring for the less fortunate in their community.

Each week, they drive a specially equipped mobile trailer into an area of the city with a concentration of homeless people. Once they arrive, they open the trailer to all comers, offering each guest the simple, everyday pleasure of taking a shower.



Danica Fong-Shoji and Craig Shoji, shown in front of their Revive + Refresh mobile hygiene center: “When our guests take a warm shower, they tell me they feel ‘human’ again,” says Craig.

The outings typically commence in the late afternoon, lasting around two hours — perhaps longer if the Shoji couple and their volunteer helpers also offer a warm meal as part of their hospitality. By evening’s end, up to two dozen grateful people will be able to clean up in an equally clean and private setting, presumably departing the premises in a much better frame of mind than when they arrived.

“When our guests take a warm shower, they tell me they feel ‘human’ again,” says Craig, who with Danica launched “Refresh + Revive” as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in November 2018.

Danica notes their guests often marvel at how a simple warm shower leaves their skin tone so much brighter. “They cannot believe how much dirt comes off, even though they regularly take cold showers in a nearby park.”

Besides the comfort and hygienic benefits of warm water, the guests also enjoy the privacy that the Shojis provide in their “mobile hygiene center.” Measuring roughly 22 feet long and six feet wide, the vehicle is divided into three separate bath compartments, each holding a shower, a sink, a toilet, and — last, but not least — a door. Given the exposed and vulnerable lives most of these people lead, they may well cherish the latter amenity as much as the other three. A guest steps into one of three compartments, shuts the door, and has the 5.6-foot x 6-foot room to themselves for 15 minutes (30 for a disabled person) to get clean and reinvigorated.

Privacy, warm running water, clean towels and fresh toiletries (furnished by a local hotel and other donors) — “These are the basics my husband, daughter, son and I, as well as our friends, take for granted, all because we have our own homes where we can take a hot shower whenever we like.”

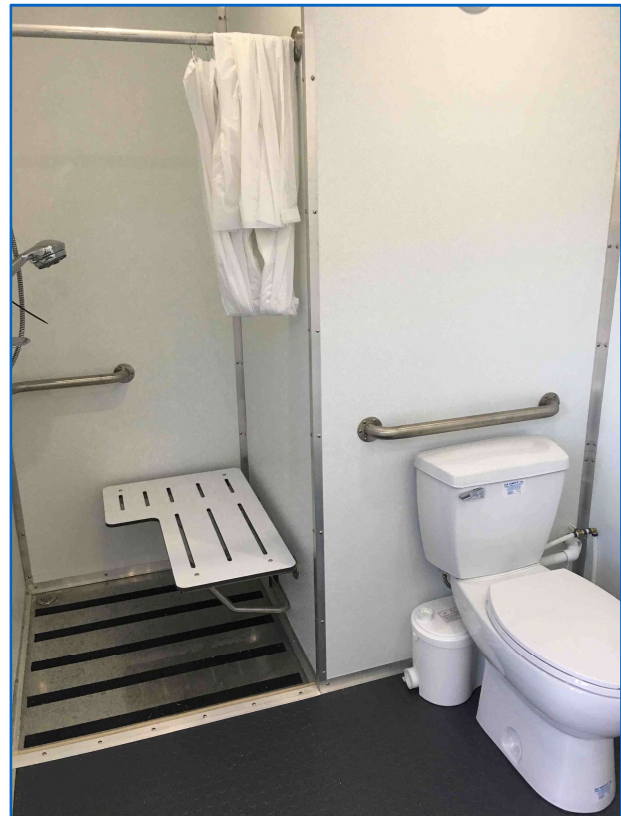
Which is why, when Danica and Craig wondered not long ago how they might best help the houseless on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, the notion of a free shower made perfect sense.

Desire to uplift

The Shojis desire to find a way to uplift their local community arose after their return from a mission trip to San Francisco’s Tenderloin neighborhood with members of the First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu (FPC) in June 2015. Their first idea for serving the homeless and low-income families was FPC Laundry Love in partnership with a local laundry service. While waiting for their laundry to be done, guests were served a hot meal in a community of fellowship.

“We averaged roughly 120 loads of laundry for 50 families per month,” says Danica of the venture, which started in October 2015.

A year and a half later, the Shojis bequeathed FPC Laundry Love to friend and fellow volunteer, Laura Kay Rand, vice president and chief impact officer for the Hawaii Foodbank and today a member of the Revive + Refresh board. This enabled the couple to shift their focus to their next idea, a mobile showering service for the same homeless constituency.



Inside the Revive + Refresh trailer’s handicap-accessible bathroom, showing the Saniflo Sanibest Pro grinder system (behind toilet), which handles drainage from not only the toilet, but also the shower (left) and the sink (not in view)

The key to the new venture was the vehicle. For expert guidance, Craig and Danica turned to a contact made in San Francisco during the mission trip: Lava Mae, which offers “showers + toilets on wheels to deliver hygiene and rekindle dignity for our unhoused neighbors” in that city. Founded in 2013, Lava Mae referred the Shojis to Comforts of Home Services, an Aurora (Chicago), IL-based fabricator of specialty trailers for private events, construction projects, and anywhere else temporary facilities are needed.



The ADA-compliant bathroom is located at one end of the trailer, shown here with its wheelchair-accessible ramp down. Because its fixtures sit below the waste tank, located beneath the vehicle, the room is equipped with a Sanibest Pro grinder system from Saniflo USA to pump the effluent up to the tank.

Comforts of Home’s engineering team equipped the trailer two “conventional” bathrooms that rely on simple gravity to drain black and gray water from their sinks, showers and toilets into a 400-gallon storage tank attached beneath the trailer. The third shower room is ADA-compliant and features a ramp for wheelchair accessibility. As a result, “the toilet and the shower sit at a lower level than the waste tank” beneath the vehicle, according to Comforts of Home general manager [Aaron Ward](#). As a consequence, waste must be pumped up to the storage tank. To perform that task, Comforts of Home installed a Sanibest Pro grinder system from Saniflo USA.

The company uses the Sanibest Pro for all its handicap-accessible trailers, says Ward, “because it’s a heavy-duty grinder system, able to handle any kind of waste, including sanitary products accidentally dropped into the toilet bowl. We have installed hundreds of the Sanibest Pro systems, and we are extremely happy using them for our trailers. They work incredibly well. Not only have they saved us time on installation, but — most important of all — they also help ensure our customers have the best experience with our trailers.”

Nothing easy about it

Once an event ends, the Shojis transfer the contents of the trailer storage tank to a second vehicle they must bring to every outing: a vacuum pump truck capable of holding 900 gallons of black and grey water. This vehicle is then hauled to a local treatment facility to unload the waste.

“In Hawaii, we don’t have the same options as folks on the mainland,” says Craig Shoji, who says the two vehicles required an outlay of approximately \$145,000, which was funded by grants and donations.

“We cannot simply discharge 900 gallons of waste water into the closest storm drain,” he continues. “Here, if you do that, it goes straight into the ocean, which is not permitted.”

Waste disposal isn’t the only complication for Danica and Craig’s charitable venture. Other ongoing challenges include:

- **Finding a suitable venue:** “We can’t simply park our trailer along the side of the road and open our doors to the homeless,” says Craig.
- **Securing the proper city and state permits,** especially when serving food: “The meals must come from a state-certified kitchen, such as a restaurant,” says Danica.
- **Securing water for the fixtures:** usually by tapping a hydrant or a nearby building, “which is why we typically must hold our events after work hours,” says Craig.
- **Recruiting volunteers:** “For certain events, we have up to 11 people assisting us,” says Danica. “For others, none at all, so the work simply falls to us and our 15-year-old son Wyatt.”

All of the above, of course, involves a great deal of time on the telephone and email, dealing with various people and officials at local and state governments and agencies. Danica and Craig manage to handle these chores while also maintaining full-time professional careers. Danica has her own at-home, accounting practice, which affords some flexibility. But her husband works up to 55 hours weekly on the overnight shift as a safety manager for a construction services company.

Nonetheless, the couple fully expects to expand their fledgling venture by doubling the monthly event frequency to eight in an effort to reach even more people. The current trailer will handle that additional activity, notes Danica, but they would like to add a second vehicle to offer laundry services again — this time as a mobile washer and dryer service.

Everyone’s got a story

Danica recalls that before their San Francisco mission trip, she wasn’t confident she would be comfortable working with the homeless. “But we quickly learned that they are, for the most part, just regular people like us and our friends.”

“Everyone has a different story” on how they found themselves in their current situations, she remarks. One guest might be a veteran of the military, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Another might have come down sick or had a family member suddenly taken ill. The upshot: These

misfortunes make holding down a full-time job difficult at best. Even guests who are employed find it next to impossible to meet the rent.

“And still others make poor choices, abusing drugs and alcohol,” Danica acknowledges. “We can sit here and grumble about these people, how they are taking over our streets and our parks. There’s no doubt that their situations impact everyone in our community. So what can we do to help them?”

“We are Christians. So we answered that question four years ago by taking a leap of faith.”

That leap has enabled the Shojis to overcome the various challenges and struggles their social outreach inevitably entails, while making their Oahu community, in the end, a little more livable and a little more friendly.

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