



THE NOE VALLEY VOICE

Twins on a Mission to Save Soles

Noe Brothers Find a Green Way To ReLace Shoes

By Matthew S. Bajko

Brothers Roshan and Niam Jain have played various sports growing up, like tennis, soccer, and flag football. Over the years, the fraternal twins, now 15, have routinely worn out or grown out of the shoes their athletic pursuits required.

And as they got older, the eco-conscious siblings wondered: what can we do with our still-good-to-use sneakers and cleats so the shoes don't end up rotting in a landfill? They knew the city's recycling program didn't allow that kind of footwear to be placed in the blue bins. Instead, it advised residents to donate them.

However, the teens saw that donating wasn't so easy for students in middle or high school, who often have packed class schedules and a ton of extracurricular activities. Most kids are not old enough to drive themselves to a place that accepts donated shoes, like Goodwill or the Salvation Army.

"Every year, we play a lot of sports and get a lot of shoes, and throw away



The Shoes Brothers: Niam and Roshan Jain pick up a barrel of old Nikes at the California Tennis Club, one of their ReLace collection sites. In May the twins were looking for a Noe Valley spot for local residents to recycle their old athletic shoes.

Photo by Art Bodner

a lot of shoes," notes Roshan. "We thought there must be a better way to give away the shoes rather than throw them out."

Living in a city with a sizable homeless population, including many families with children who find themselves unhoused, the Jains felt it would be a better fit to see their discarded shoes and that of their teammates and fellow students, as well as their family

Night Market Moves Onto 24th Street

June 24 Event Promises to Double the Vendors

By Matthew S. Bajko

The Noe Valley Night Market will be taking over a block of 24th Street in addition to its home base of the Noe

Residents Still Reeling From May Fire

Two Dogs Die in 26th Street Blaze

By Corrie M. Anders

It was more than a week after a fire destroyed his home and took the lives of his pets. But Pitchaw Thongkom was still lost.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," said Thongkom, 50, barely speaking above a whisper as he stood on the sidewalk outside his home at 4213 26th St.

Thongkom was sorting through a field of soggy and burnt debris, trying to salvage whatever he could.

There wasn't much. A fire in the pre-dawn hours of Monday, May 19, had raced through the dwelling, sending up a tower of flames seen miles away.

First to respond were firefighters from Noe Valley's Station 11 three blocks down the hill, at 26th and Church streets. They put out the blaze in less than a half hour. Sadly, they were unable to save two dogs found in the home.

The fire was a devastating blow to Thongkom, who had lived in the house since 2016.

Thongkom said the loss of his pets,

ReLace Brothers Give New Life to Old Shoes

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

members and other adults, repurposed rather than tossed in the garbage.

They decided to take action two years ago while in seventh grade at the private San Francisco Day School on Masonic Avenue. After brainstorming a solution, Roshan and Niam launched a shoe collection drive.

To coordinate their efforts, the brothers formed a nonprofit they named ReLace, a not-so-subtle reference to re-tying one’s shoelaces to ensure the footwear is usable again. Niam created a logo depicting a white shoelace wrapped around a green orb, with “ReLace” in the middle in white letters. The green made clear their environmental zeal.

“It was a hard decision,” Roshan told the *Voice* about landing on the right name for their 501(c)3 entity, which was officially recognized by the Internal Revenue Service on Aug. 13, 2023. “This one made the most sense.”

The brothers began by asking gyms—or other places where they worked out or played tennis—if they could set up collection bins on their site, so people could leave their unwanted shoes. The California Tennis Club in Lower Pacific Heights, CrossFit Alinea in the Mission, and Diakadi Fitness in Showplace Square all agreed to become collection points.

With help from their parents, the brothers collect the shoes on a regular basis. They’ve been surprised to see how many shoes appear to be hardly used and in excellent condition. Some look as if they’ve never been worn or were bought purposely to be donated to ReLace.

“People are literally donating brand new shoes with the tags still on,” said the teens’ mother, Shilpa Jain.

Widening the Circuit

The young philanthropists also received permission from Day School administrators to hold a shoe drive on their campus. It netted several hundred shoes and an ongoing partnership once the brothers matriculated to ninth grade, with Niam now at Lick Wilmerding High School and Roshan at University High School.

“Our goal, really, is not about shoes but more about getting volunteers and seeing if this model works and if we can scale up our operation,” says Niam.

The *Voice* met up with the brothers and their parents at their Noe Valley home on the 1000 block of Castro



Roshan and Niam Jain load up to deliver their shoes to Compass Family Services, an agency that will hand them out to families in need. Photo by Art Bodner

Street in early May. They were gearing up for a shoe drive to be held in a few weeks at their former middle school. The event was to be overseen by four current Day School students the Jains had recruited to organize it with them.

“If the model goes well, our plan is to multiply it to other middle schools in the fall,” said Roshan.

They set a goal of collecting 800 pairs of shoes this year, a goal they expect to meet.

Shoe Waste Can Be Toxic

The brothers are partnering with two other established shoe-recycling nonprofits, Sneakers 4 Good and Got Sneakers?, to which they ship the footwear they collect that is too ratty to be reused but salvageable in some other way. According to Got Sneakers?, most people don’t think to recycle their sneakers and will throw them away 125 to 200 days after buying them, with an

estimated 200 million pairs of shoes and sneakers annually thrown in the trash. Much of the material used to make sneakers isn’t biodegradable, notes the nonprofit, and can take 30 to 40 years to decompose in a landfill. If the shoes end up being incinerated, the burning rubber creates toxic chemicals that pollute the air and soil.

39 Million Pounds of Textiles

San Francisco’s Department of the Environment calculates that 4,500 pounds of textiles are sent to the city’s landfill every hour, totaling 39 million pounds per year. (It doesn’t break out footwear from the other textiles.)

Via ReLace, the Jain brothers are helping the city reach its goal of reducing disposal to landfill and incineration by 50 percent come 2030 (meaning cutting in half what gets thrown into the black garbage bins given to businesses and households).

As of the spring, ReLace had collected 1,251 pairs of shoes, donated 202 pairs of shoes to local families and children, and displaced 37,530 pounds of CO₂ emissions by keeping the footwear out of the landfill.

Donating to Local Kids

The brothers take the donated shoes—which must be in good condition, meaning they have no holes and come with their laces and soles attached—to Compass Family Services on Grove Street. The nonprofit organization works with homeless and at-risk families in the city, and hands out the ReLace shoes to its clients’ children. The brothers have yet to personally meet any of the youth who have benefited from their shoe drives, but the twins do receive notes of gratitude from the families, relayed by Compass staff.

“My son, Andy, is growing so fast, and just as I was about to buy him a new pair of shoes, this generous donation came through. It was such a thoughtful and much-needed item, and we are grateful for the support,” read one note accompanied by a photo of a smiling Andy holding his pair of Babolat white tennis shoes. (The message can be seen on ReLace’s Instagram page at <https://www.instagram.com/relacesf/>.)

Seeing the impact their efforts are having on fellow San Francisco residents has been “really powerful,” said Roshan. “We are able to help the environment and are able to help our local community.”

A Collection Bin in Noe?

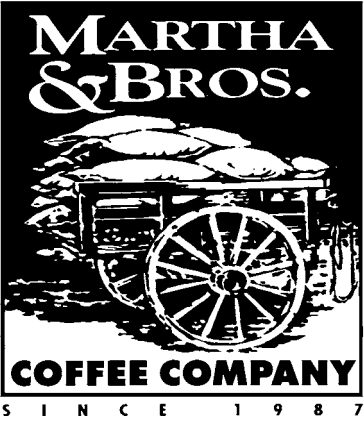
The brothers have yet to form a board of directors to help them run the nonprofit, though it is something they are looking into doing. With their heading off to college in three years, the *Voice* inquired about the teens’ plans for ReLace once they graduate from high school.

Niam replied they hadn’t given “too much thought” to the future of the nonprofit but hope it will keep going. It is one of the reasons they are looking to connect with students at other schools who might take on leadership roles in ReLace, should Niam and Roshan end up at universities outside the Bay Area.

“The key factor is that we are able to continue this,” Niam said.

A more immediate goal is to secure a location in Noe Valley to set up a collection point where neighborhood residents can drop off their unwanted footwear. The brothers have started the search but have not yet found the right business to partner with.

To contact them, email relacesf@gmail.com. To learn more about ReLace, visit its website at <https://relacesf.org/>. ■



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