

LEEN SADDER OF THIS TOOTHBRUSH

Oasis Exclusive

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Oasis sat down with entrepreneur Leen Sadder in the Big Apple as she revealed just how she sunk her teeth into the business of cleaning dirty mouths.

Leen Sadder is an accidental Tooth Cleaning Fairy. Flashing a healthy, pearly-white smile, she gently waves a teeth-cleaning stick called “the miswak” near her mouth, as she confidently demonstrates how her cigar-cutter-like design will help clean teeth without the use of toothbrushes, toothpaste—or even water.

“Before working on this, I had never heard of the

miswak—I only had a very vague memory from childhood,” Leen starts. Growing up in Beirut, Lebanon, Leen brushed her teeth with regular toothbrush and toothpaste, just like everyone else. But three years ago, while pursuing a design graduate degree from the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York, a standard class assignment changed her perspective.

During her first semester ever at SVA, Leen and her classmates were instructed to redesign the first item that they threw away. At home, Leen found an empty tube of toothpaste. How could she re-package that, she thought? She started to research the evolution of teeth-cleaning tools.



She found that the miswak, or siwak, is nature's toothbrush. "The Miswak (chewing stick) was used by the Babylonians some 7,000 years ago; it was later used throughout the Greek and Roman empires, and has also been used by ancient Egyptians and Muslims. Chewing sticks are used for oral hygiene, religious and social purposes," the medical paper, titled *The Miswak (chewing Stick): A Cultural And Scientific Heritage*, describes the historical significance of the magic twig. Extracted mainly from the branches of the *Salvadora Persica* tree,

which grows in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, the miswak is an Arabic word that translates to "tooth-cleaning stick." Research from the World Health Organization shows that the miswak contains an antibiotic that can suppress the growth of bacteria and plaque formation in the mouth. The miswak is frequently used by Muslims before each of the five daily prayers, to orally clean the teeth and gums, following the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who is to have said, "Siwak purifies the mouth and pleases Allah."

After stumbling upon several websites, citing the ancient history of dental hygiene, she printed out a photo of the miswak and showed it to a Pakistani couple who worked at a local NYC copy machine shop. When the couple instantly recognized the miswak, they quickly gifted her with a vacuum-sealed stick, which they coincidentally had in their shop. Little did Leen realize that that was the start of strangers helping her.

“That is when I thought, ‘okay, people use it daily—even in NYC.’ It’s a 2 in 1, toothbrush and toothpaste at once. I would work with that,” she reflected.

Traditionally, the stick, which is the size of a pencil, is sold in bulk on the streets or in pharmacies in the Islamic world; in single, tightly sealed bags. Once the outer plastic bag is opened, the very top of the miswak is scraped off or removed, either with a knife or with one’s teeth. The removed part, a few centimeters long, is disposed of, and is biodegradable. The bristles, revealed from beneath the removed head, releases a fresh sap and silica; a hard glossy mineral that acts as an abrasive material for the removal stains and plaque buildup. The miswak is used on the teeth directly, without the need for toothpaste or water. These sticks do not come with a carrying case or a place for safe storage.

For her class, Leen decides to settle on creating an updated portable carrying case and cutter for the miswak. Her design sketch consists of a cutter, which seals the miswak into a clear carrying tube. Her cutter automatically locks, and only once twisted, would unlock to chop off the top of the stick, much like a cigar cutter would. Moist bristles would be released to literally “brush” over the teeth, much like a paintbrush. She found Islamic websites recommend that users brush in circular motion, applying moderate pressure. The same stick could be used several times, depending on the humidity in the air and the quality of the branch. The lightweight carrying case she designed,

made of durable, tough plastic and a thin blade, would easily fit into a pocket or purse.

Leen posted the design to her online student portfolio and forgot about it. Soon, emails from experts and potential customers flooded in, asking her where they could get their hands on the case. Surprised by the intrigue, she confessed to them that it was not a real product. Then she thought, why wouldn’t it be real? She consulted with dental experts, researchers and obtained a utility patent for the functionality of the case and started a marketing campaign. She called the case and cutter “THIS Toothbrush,” as play on words, as the miswak didn’t really resemble a toothbrush, but functioned as one.

Nearly a year after graduating, Leen created an online survey and asked 100 of her contacts if they had ever used the miswak, 73 percent responded that they had never used it, and of those, over 90 percent said that they would consider trying it. Encouraged by the numbers, Leen went back to technology to promote the ancient stick. She approached a brand new crowd-funding website called Zoomaal.com, which aims to promote local Arab talent, to create a campaign for her where people could donate money to help fund her vision. Visitors of the Zoomaal site had six reward options; ranging from a thank you postcard (if you donated \$10 or less) to a custom-engraved wooden humidifier with multiple carrying cases and refill packs (if you donated \$1,000 or more). Although the money was spent online, the users would receive a physical reward in the mail. On the last day of the two-month online campaign, on Sept. 6, THIS reached well-over their goal of \$18,000, with over \$750 extra. Her project was one of the first to launch on Zoomaal, and one of their first success stories. At the final day of her campaign, there were over 4.3k Facebook likes to her product page, 5,814 shares from the site and 301 paying contributors.

One of those Zoomaal supporters, Mohamad

Sobh, who works in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, is a regular miswak user. He appreciated the organic, minimalistic design and Leen's drive to go beyond blind consumerism, and instantly contributed upon learning about the campaign.

"The impressive things about this project to me were: the rethinking of the whole idea behind the miswak and bringing it into the 21st century—[there has been] no product development whatsoever over the past 700 years; and easing the pains of the consumers, most miswak users, myself included, have a hard time storing the stick and sharpening it," Mohamad said.

Those living in Saudi Arabia or other Gulf countries were well-aware of the miswak. A study, conducted by a group of dentists at King Saud University in Saudi Arabia, led by Dr. Khalid al-Mas, now a professor at New York University, concluded that there is a total of 19 natural substances found within the miswak that benefit dental health.

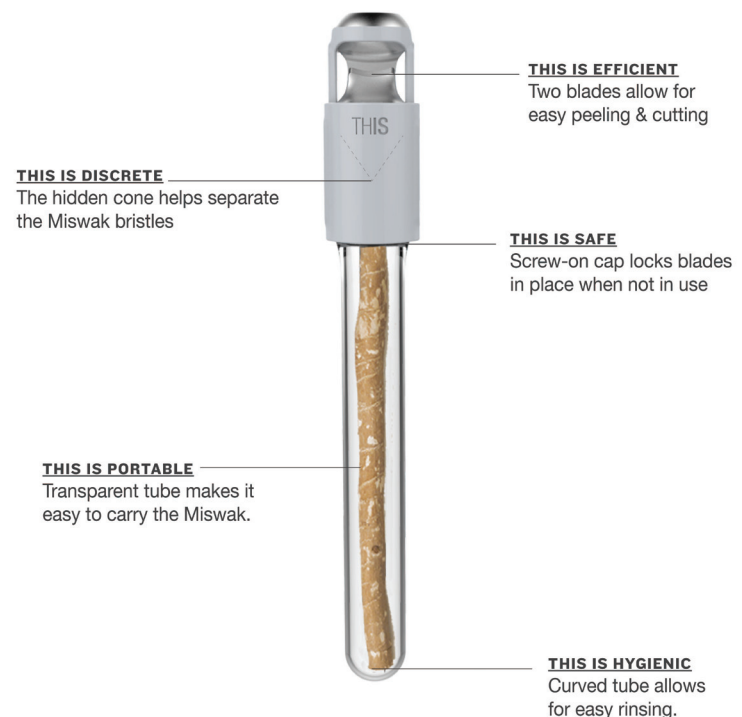
"[The Miswak] contains a number of natural antiseptics that kill harmful microorganisms in the mouth; tannic acids that protect the gums from disease; and aromatic oils that increase salivation. Because of its built-in antiseptics, the miswak needs no cleaning, and because its bristles are parallel to the handle rather than perpendicular, it can reach more easily between the teeth, where a conventional toothbrush often misses. [It] can fight plaque, gum line recession, tooth wear, gingivitis, and periodontal pocket depths," the study reads.

Leen's next challenge was to also make it relatable to the western audience. The fact that she was introduced to it as an adult helped her understand how difficult it could be to ask others to change a habit. "The first time I tried a miswak, it was weird. It didn't taste like mint, but it felt fresh. I hope people try it and give it a chance," she said.

Not only would it be good to try something new,

but it could be useful in a pinch, too. "If you go camping, or don't have access to water, a miswak would do. It has less chemicals and we've all heard of the hazards of fluoride [found in toothpaste]. It's a safe, organic alternative," she said. Her transparent tube celebrates the natural twig product and what it represents. At this stage, they are targeting adults and in talks to provide these miswaks for use in developing countries such as Haiti, Palestine and Ethiopia, where water resources might be scarce. Also, using THIS product could decrease the number of toothbrushes tossed into landfills, as the American Dental Association recommends replacing one's toothbrush every three months. That could add up to over a dozen toothbrushes per family, every year.

"THIS is modernizing a tradition and preserving a culture, by trying to elevate and celebrate it," Leen says. Although her cutter and carrying stick should fit most standard miswaks, Leen hopes that clients purchase them from her directly. This way she





could guarantee that the sticks have been checked for consistency, size, thickness and quality control. Her small team is currently exploring a mini version of the miswak, with just the cutter attached to one's keychain, for easy access.

Leen says that they are aiming for early 2014 to have the product manufactured and shipped out. The first batch will go to all the Zoomaal supporters, then to the masses in stores. She estimates that the reusable carrying case and cutter package would only need to be purchased once, and would cost around \$10.00 (SR 37.50). Each package would include a pack of regular or flavored miswak sticks, but additional sticks would be sold separately, as needed.

"The interesting thing is how organic it all formed,

it started as a student product and then via the internet, with the support of strangers wanting to help." The online platform enabled her to interact with her would-be-clients and solicit instant feedback. Leen never got to thank the Pakistani couple who gave her the first miswak, as their NYC copy shop has since closed down, but she would like to thank her online supporters.

"I wasn't sure we were going to make it [raise the money], but I really want to give a big thank you to everyone who has been so supportive and so patient."

Now, that is something to smile about.

Follow Leen's THIS Toothbrush journey, on her main site: www.leensadder.com