

## **Winner of Falling Walls Lab Vietnam Helping to Solve Vietnam's Plastic Waste Problem**



Vietnam is among the top five producers of plastic waste globally, and it is estimated that the country dumps about 1.8 million tons of plastic waste annually into the sea. But solutions are being developed, and this year's winner of the Falling Walls Lab in Vietnam may have part of the answer.

Ms. Vo Quoc Thao Nguyen from Saigon was declared the winner of the first Falling Walls Lab in Vietnam with her contribution to solving the Vietnam's plastic waste problem. Her solution, which she calls "Breaking the Wall of Plastic Straw", proposes replacing plastic straws with environmentally friendly natural straws made of a grass that is abundant in the Mekong Delta. Making this shift would not only reduce the amount of plastic choking Vietnam's coastline and waterways but would help create jobs in the Mekong Delta.

### **1. You delivered the winning performance at the Falling Walls Lab competition in Vietnam. What is your innovative idea?**

My innovative idea is "Breaking the Wall of Plastic Straw". Instead of plastic straws, it is better to use environmentally-friendly straws from a particular grass called "Lepironia" which grows naturally in the Mekong Delta area.

### **2. Why should people pay attention to your research project?**

Vietnam is one of the top five countries that discards plastic waste into the ocean along with China, Indonesia, Philippines, and



Thailand. And this is having a huge impact on marine life in particular as well as on those making their living from the sea.



As an eco-friendly person, I am fascinated with products which can be made using natural materials. Lepironia is a natural straw-like plant that is safe to both humans and the environment and is being used in the making of baskets and handicrafts.

You can use the plants when they are still green after being harvested or after they have been dried. I am still looking to perfect the drying technique. By exploring this idea, I also think this is a very good opportunity to create employment for local people in the Mekong Delta.

### **3. How did you win over the audience?**

All of us use plastic straws without realizing the consequences that they have on us and on the environment we live in. We use the plastic straws because they are cheap and convenient.

Like others, I used to use plastic straws without giving any thought to their devastating effect on the environment until I watched a video clip showing a straw stuck in the nostril of a sea turtle. I could feel that turtle's pain, and that clip still sticks in my head till now like a scar. It motivated me to change my bad habits, and I thought I could also influence others as well. Better late than never, it's now time for us to "Say No to Plastic Straws." If we all take this step, it will have a very positive effect on us on our future and the environment.

### **4. You will be representing Vietnam in the global Falling Walls Lab Finale in Berlin this November? How are you preparing for the event?**



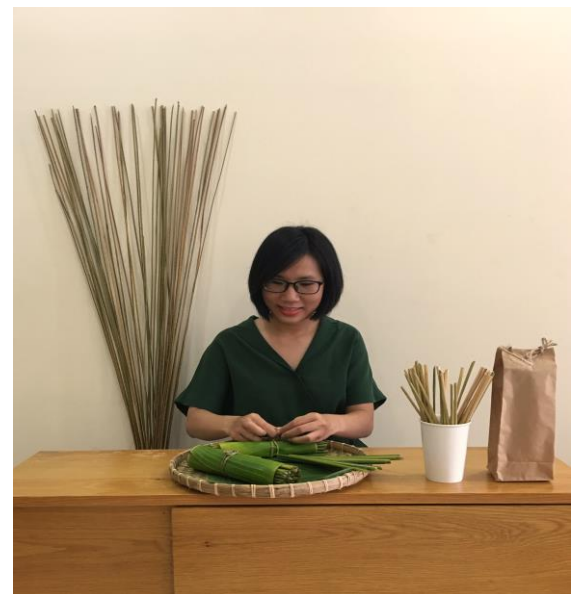
At the Falling Walls Lab Finale in Berlin, I would like to take this chance to introduce the natural plastic straw to people from all over the world. This type of grass is common in tropical countries, especially in the alum rich soil of the Mekong Delta.

I will bring some samples of these grass straws for international friends to try. I hope this small idea will have a huge impact on people's daily habits so that we can change the world together.

**5. You are also the winner of the EURAXESS Prize 2018 to visit a research lab anywhere in the EU. What are your plans?**

I would like to take the opportunity to visit a research lab in EU to present my grass straw product, and seek business and technical assistance for the cutting and drying of the grass, as well

looking for news to ways to extend the lifespan of the straws.



**6. What are you most looking forward to?**

I am running a "start-up for the environment" for this grass straw project. It will raise people's awareness about the plastic waste, protect the environment and use the eco-friendly grass straw instead. I am working on my plan to approach some local organizations in Vietnam and then hopefully in the region.



**7. Where do you see yourself in 10 years in terms of your research idea and your career?**

I will continue to grow my grass straw start up company, and in 10 years I hope to be exporting grass straw products to all corners of the world, and thereby eliminate the demand for plastic straws.