

This is my first experience participating in the GeeBiz program. It has surpassed all my expectations. The experience is best described as mentally stimulating, heart-heartbreakingly frustrating at times but overall, extremely rewarding. In the short 3 weeks, I have challenged and altered my worldview and have made friends who will someday (soon!) crash on my couch in Wellington.

My team consisted of a Colombian, an Australian, 2 Americans and 2 Bangladeshis. We began the journey by sharing personal quirks to break the ice. Then we spent 10 days brainstorming ideas. There was a multitude of ideas, ranging from “green architecture” design to “water treatment” facilities. In late March, Laura shared the plight of the Moravian slum dwellers. It had been raining incessantly in Medellin. She was concerned about their lack of protection from the harsh elements. Her concern had a profound effect on the team. We unanimously voted to further develop her idea for GeeBiz.

Our idea was to mount a two-pronged challenge to solve this problem. We would utilize a green approach to relocate the urban slum dwellers. This would help address one of the most unjust situations that exist in most third world countries. Property rights are guaranteed under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights yet these people are often “driven” from their land to make way for government infrastructure projects and do not receive adequate compensation. In addition, some are seeking a better life in the city and to leave the back-breaking labour in their farming communities. In Moravia, the government intends to resettle the slum dwellers. Therefore, our proposal included sourcing sustainable timber, manufacturing kit-set homes which could be flat-packed, selling the kit-set homes to the government, and then training the future homeowners how to assemble their homes. It was the perfect idea! Sustainable design meets social justice. Treating the environment and humans fairly. There need not be a compromise between fiscal cost and a human life.

Two days prior to the deadline, Chase, Henry and I worked through the night churning out every aspect of the project. I relished the experience because it honestly felt like they were physically present in Wellington although in reality, they were on the other side of the Pacific. I enjoyed our interaction as we bounced ideas off each other, focused on getting the job done. When fatigue set in, Chase and Henry provided the much needed comic relief. Henry was driven and motivated. He had the capacity to keep us on the task at hand. Chase was very encouraging; occasionally sharing the odd “Did you know that ...” questions that had us burst into laughter. Working with Chase and Henry highlighted the joys of being in a supportive team environment. However, there were minor set-backs. I did not have full cooperation of the team. Some appeared at the start of the project then disappeared. Another did not bother to log on at all. Therefore, I am all the more grateful for Chase and Henry. One must take the good with the bad.

I found that to be an effective communicator, I had to write clearly. In spite of the advances in technology, clarity, simplicity and succinctness are fundamental to any mode of communication. My expectation of my team's performance had to be clearly communicated. Deadlines had to be set. Project tasks had to be assigned. The team must have the opportunity to voice their opinions. It is a continuous feed-forward and feed-back cycle. Similarly, any communication must be interpreted while bearing in mind the cultural context of the communicator. There were occasions when simple words were misconstrued and good intentions led to misunderstandings.

My most insightful experience was to be “exposed” (albeit remotely) to the injustices that people living in developing countries must face daily. Prior to this experience, I thought I had a measure of “awareness” of the plight of the poor. Yet, my understanding barely scratches the surface of its complexities. From a distance, it is easy to reduce people to mere statistics but when confronting the issue, I came to see them as real people. Painfully, a forgotten part of society. This reinforced my belief that one does not require the might of Samson or the wisdom and richness of Solomon to change our world. I am not an idealist, but even in my youth, I can make a difference. It begins with putting myself in another's shoes. It only took a GeeBiz spark to get things going – from the inception of an idea, to new friends found, to a solution to help others half-way across the globe. A snowballing effect! That, I think is why GeeBiz is such a rewarding experience.