

A Young Philadelphia Social Entrepreneur Reflects on Expanding her Career through Social Investment

Kiley Smith 09 June 2011

My plane landed at 4:30 a.m. on a Sunday. I was starting a new adventure in a foreign land, which is not so atypical from my recent vacations, but this trip was not a retreat. I was in Santiago, Chile to complete a five-week volunteer business advisory project for an emerging market entrepreneur in the academic software sector as an Ernst & Young Corporate Responsibility (CR) Fellow. This was going to be one of the biggest challenges I faced in my career to date. Not only was I helping a dynamic business achieve its goals for growth, I was adapting to a different culture, learning the nuances to doing business in an emerging market and finding ways to engage and energize a diverse management team.

Helping an aspiring entrepreneurial company achieve its potential

Within my first week as a CR Fellow, I could already see the growing pains that the entrepreneur faced trying to transform the start-up business into a multinational software company. Through strategy sessions with the

top executives and intense interviews with key stakeholders in each operating unit, the entrepreneur and I developed a set of adaptable and sustainable performance metrics to measure the success of the business as it progressed. I also facilitated the company's first leadership training and strategy meeting for all company executives, which produced some great introspective analysis on leadership and helped strengthen relationships within the team.

For the past 6 years, the CR Fellows Program has sent high-performing managers from the US and Canada to assist entrepreneurs in emerging markets. The entrepreneurs are identified by Endeavor, an international nonprofit organization, as high-impact business opportunities with the potential to create substantial customer value, jobs and economic activity. I was fortunate that Endeavor also provided continual support to me while I was in Chile and helped my entrepreneur build ties to the business network in Santiago. This opened my eyes to the important role that for-profit and nonprofit teaming can play in strengthening a cross-sector volunteer program and thereby contributing to the community.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, business leaders discussed the pivotal role that entrepreneurs and young, innovative thinkers will play in fostering economic progress in the years to come. This

made me think about my own career: What skills will I need to make a contribution in the global economy? How can I continue to support entrepreneurs and innovative youth? What will I be able to do to make an impact and foster innovation?

I realized that my growth as a professional and as a leader is best fostered not just at my day-job for work, but through the volunteer opportunities and service to the community available to me at Ernst & Young. The firm encourages me to develop in many ways, such as classroom training, stretch assignments, on-the-job coaching, and through the organization's broad commitment to corporate responsibility. Ernst & Young has enabled me to participate in a number of skills-based volunteering efforts that have given me enormous opportunities to stretch and grow, and to give back in meaningful ways. These volunteer opportunities, where I have committed a piece of myself and my career, continue to strongly shape my professional development the most.

Inspiring Students to Pursue a College Education

I come from a family of educators who consistently stressed the importance of education and the role it plays in a fulfilling life. And I work for a Big Four accounting firm, so it's not surprising that I have a passion for mathematics education. As a mathematics major in college, I tutored

high school students. When I started my career at Ernst & Young in 2004, I missed that role. Fortunately, the firm made it easy for me to connect with local students and to make an even greater impact because I was teaming with other Ernst & Young colleagues. I've been active in two volunteer programs that target under-served youth: the Cyberchase volunteer program (when I was working in New York) and the College MAP (Mentoring for Access and Persistence) program here in Philadelphia.

The Cyberchase program is an after-school math class for elementary-age students, with a particular focus on girls and minorities. In conjunction with the popular PBS TV show of the same name, Cyberchase shows students that math is fun and all around us. Elementary school is a critical time when students decide they are either "good" or "bad" at math, and this program helps to move students over that hump to realize that math is not a foreign language. In 2008, I took over the project manager role for Cyberchase in an effort to not only build the volunteer program, but also to demonstrate my management skills and ability to progress to the next level within the firm. The program allowed me to do just that; I managed a 6-week program and a group of 25 volunteers to motivate more than 30 students in mathematics. This is an impact and accomplishment I would not have been able to achieve on my own without the corporate volunteer programs available to me.

When I relocated to Philadelphia in October 2009, I naturally wanted to get involved in the local community. Ernst & Young had just launched a pilot College MAP program at Frankford High School in North Philadelphia in collaboration with College for Every Student (CFES), a national nonprofit that helps underserved public school students take steps toward college. (Similar College MAP programs are in place in 10 other US cities). Here in Philadelphia, that meant that a dedicated group of mentors and even more dedicated group of Frankford juniors were brought together to “map” a plan for applying to and attending college. I decided to join this pilot program after my transfer from New York in order to expand my internal network and to inspire these students to follow through with their goals. MAP helped me realize the importance of building relationships, both with regard to strategic nonprofit and for-profit teaming (Ernst & Young and CFES), as well as the strong contacts that I made with executives within my own organization by having the opportunity to connect outside of our typical work environment. Over the last 2 years with the students, we have seen their enthusiasm toward higher education grow and then come to fruition in college acceptance letters. The energy has been contagious.

Skills-based Volunteering Enriches Careers

There are countless volunteer options available for anyone

interested enough to look, but I'm thrilled that through the CR Fellows program, Cyberchase and College MAP, I've found ways to make a difference that tap into my professional experience at Ernst & Young. By taking advantage of such opportunities, I continue to strive toward my true potential as a business professional, building leadership, management and organizational skills that are unique to each challenge that arises. I am proud that I've been able to make a more substantial contribution than I ever expected, because I'm providing much more than a pair of hands.

As more organizations team with nonprofit organizations to offer community engagement opportunities for their employees, we are seeing an increase in the number of people who are volunteering and the value they are bringing to those they touch. I've become a strong advocate for skills-based and career-building projects and strategic teaming between the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. When corporations challenge their traditional avenues of corporate responsibility and create innovative approaches to supporting the community and developing their employees, they foster value that is beyond measure.

The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Ernst & Young LLP.