

A Journey into social enterprise

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“Taking initiative in making the world a better place – it’s in your heart”

Ever since launching Waterlution almost 8 months ago, people have often asked me if this organisation, or a version of its concept, has been something I always aspired to create. After attending the Community Experience Initiative Career Event at York’s Schulich School of Business a few weeks back, I must say the answer is a little “yes” and little “no”.

The “yes” part was that I have always wanted to create something innovative. I simply never knew exactly what that innovation would look like and I was not sure if that innovation would stem from my business, international development or environmental background. It has been a long and interesting road. And somehow, through ten years of life experiences, working overseas and mostly learning about myself, I finally realised that every value I possessed, every vision I had and all those professional experiences could fall under one roof and become Waterlution.

So when I was asked to write this article, I began to think back to where this journey began and, if you will stay with me, I hope I can offer up a few insights that might be inspiring to others. While studying International Business at Concordia University, I was getting restless with my studies and decided I needed to be more active and get out in the world. The NAFTA agreement was being signed, I was not too pleased with what Canada was signing nor impressed with the deal I thought the Mexicans were getting. Within two months, Tatiana Glad (my Waterlution business partner) and I were heading down to Mexico City for an AIESEC youth gathering to explore the issues with our peers from the U.S. and Mexico.

That time in Mexico holds only happy memories. We made new friends, I realised how much I enjoyed learning a new language, how I loved the chaos of that complicated city, the unusual tastes and sounds and all the dancing in the streets. This was it. I had figured it all out, I was going to take my business skills and work in international development. I also knew something else – it was subtle, but I knew – that someday, somehow, I would create something with Tatiana – we really “got” each other – our core values were in sync.

After university, I was fortunate to land several contracts with development agencies to work on micro-credit lending programs and youth development initiatives in Colombia, Bolivia and Costa Rica. My development experience was the most rewarding, confusing and – ultimately – life-changing time in my life. I embarked on each of these missions with good intentions and, yet, the more I learned the more I questioned my role and eventually realised that I had to leave these wonderful places, these wonderful people and go back to where I came from. I came to understand that sustainability comes from a deeply vested interest in where you call home. No matter what I did, I would never be an indigenous Bolivian or Costa Rican and therefore all the work I was doing would be better served if I initiated, developed and delivered these types of programs within my own culture – as real “development” needs exist there too.

One of the deepest impacts that occurred to me during these years was that many people in developing countries did not waste a single thing and only created garbage as they were being introduced to foreign products with packaging for which they had no custom of disposal. As I reflected on my learning from these various experiences – and wondered, what do I do next? – a few more crucial pieces of the puzzle pulled together and I felt drawn to increase my environmental education.

I was relieved that all my time in development work had not been wasted. I was quite sure that this time I had it all figured out. I was going to move away from development work and into environmental work as that was really where change in our world and communities needed to occur.

This new epiphany took me back to Canada and into an Advanced Geography course at York University, where I focused on water and environmental management. Before long, I was overseas again to London, England where I began using my newly acquired (and continuously growing) environmental knowledge to write and develop corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports for multinational companies. This was an interesting time! I was learning so much everyday about what corporations were focusing on and yet I was also becoming increasingly

aware that many companies were moving onto the CSR bandwagon for selfish public relations reasons and that few were genuinely interested in lowering their ecological impact on the planet. What I was doing professionally was still not responding to my deep burning questions: Where does change happen? How do people change their deeply socialised behaviours? And what can I do to foster learning that is inclusive, creative and comprising whole systems thinking?

After all these years of seemingly figuring things out, it was strange that yet again I felt like I still needed more information and a deeper understanding of all the interconnections on this planet. This led me to the World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa where I helped organise parallel learning events in the local community with Pioneers of Change. And in the midst of all that chaos and excitement, I came to the realisation of my deep love of water and how it could be used as a medium to explain and explore almost every system and interconnection on this planet.

During the year after the WSSD, I spent a lot of time talking to people and pulling ideas together that really spoke to my passion and vision for a more sustainable relationship with water, finally launching Waterlution and finally being given the chance to create something with my long-time trusted friend and colleague, Tatiana, who had been asking herself similar questions. Tatiana and I learnt together and separately every day about how to live within our culture while listening to our values and always referring back to the principles we created together that form the foundation of our organisation.

We make mistakes, we celebrate our successes and we feel very excited about where we are going. It was a long journey yet eventually all the elements came together and we took the plunge. And for the first time in a decade, I don't claim to have it all figured out; but I know that by combining all the things I believe in, I am best contributing to building our vision. Everyday Tatiana and I explore the interconnection of the social, the environmental and the economic elements that make up our world. One can be taught the triple bottom line, but systems only change once we have felt them from the inside.