

New Business Start-ups

Entrepreneurial excellence: recent graduates pursue their passions through promising new businesses

BY ADDILYN TOMLINSON

From digital start-ups to independent niche market retailers, a new group of ambitious grads is making waves in the business world, navigating financial and logistical obstacles to make their businesses work. Start-ups are blooming all over the country and especially here in New York. Undergraduate students from a variety of universities and fields are making waves with their creativity and ingenuity.

An Indiana University student recently started an all-natural energy drink called Punch and is beginning to market this drink through Anheuser-Busch distributors. Another student from the University of Houston owns and operates three Simply Splendid Donut and Ice Cream stores while also double-majoring in entrepreneurship and marketing. *Educated Observer* spoke to two emerging entrepreneurs who shared how they have used their ideas and diverse educational experiences to their advantage.

For some risk takers, straying from their degree's designated path can lead to success as it has for Ajiri Tea founder Sara Holby. While attending Bowdoin College, Ms. Holby studied history and environmental studies and spent one semester in Kenya through a program at



COURTESY SPOTFRONT

Alex Sherman at Spotfront's headquarters.

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St. Lawrence University. After graduating in 2008, Ms. Holby returned to Kisii, a region in Kenya, to volunteer for a health-related non-governmental organization through a Global Citizens Grant.

As her passion for the people she was working with grew, so did her desire to help them in ways beyond "handing stuff out." Ms. Holby wanted to create jobs and aid the community in empowering itself. "The word *ajiri* literally means 'to employ' in Swahili," she explained. "And this was the goal of the tea company: to create careers in Kenya."

Ms. Holby and her mother started the business together, and as of now, some 60 Kenyan women work with Ajiri Tea creating homemade labels from banana tree bark. The tea itself is grown on local farms in western Africa, and profits are dedicated to orphan education in the Kisii region. In that way, the business is creating a systematic cycle for growth and education for young people in Kenya.

Ms. Holby's education has certainly aided in her endeavor and will continue to do so. She expressed how her liberal arts education gave her well-rounded business sensibilities: "I think that my overall range of courses, the ability to speak to people and the ability to walk into a room and present my ideas to people was important in creating my business."

Another emerging entrepreneur, Alex Sherman, the CEO and co-founder of Spotfront, advocates for starting even earlier than Ms. Holby did.

"Start your own company while you're an

undergrad," he told *Educated Observer*. "It is the perfect place to incubate a product, and of course, you have more time and resources."

Spotfront, a self-funded advertising technology start-up whose clients include Fortune 500 companies, marketers and tech and media companies, has benefited directly from Mr. Sherman's undergrad education at Columbia. A history major, Mr. Sherman recognizes and advises to undergrads who may be unsure of their choice of major in light of their desired career path. Before founding Spotfront, he worked as a product manager for MediaMath, a leading demand-side platform in the online advertising industry.

"Fundamentally, I am a business generalist," he said. "But my liberal arts major helps me to wear many different hats. Being a liberal arts major taught me how to problem solve." This detail is especially important to Mr. Sherman as his business continues to prosper.

"We're looking to double the team over the next six months," he said. "It's a very competitive market out there, and one way we differentiate ourselves is by telling candidates that we're a bootstrap company. Ultimately, what that means as a candidate is that you will be quickly placed into the middle of our company with real responsibility and real impact."

Ms. Holby and Mr. Sherman show how a solid education, combined with an entrepreneurial spirit, can produce big results. "Follow what you really love," said Ms. Holby. "At the end of the day, whatever you end up studying, be sure to enjoy it, and you will grow." ■



Sara Holby with a student from Kisii, Kenya.

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