



SPECIAL REPORT: THE SOCIAL INNOVATION CHALLENGE

Rising to the Challenge

A United Church-funded contest asks entrepreneurs to use their ingenuity to find new solutions to some of the world's most troublesome social problems

BY NANCY FORNASIERO

Inside a huge, windowed room overlooking Lake Ontario, innovators huddle in little groups. They're all abuzz, practising their spiels for the evening's pitching contest, which will kick off the Social Innovation Challenge (SIC), a two-day event at George Brown College's Waterfront Campus in Toronto. A handful of professional pitching coaches circulate to each table. They're offering one-on-one advice on how to make the most of the opportunity contestants will be given to prove their idea is solid enough to advance to the next day's short list. With only 60 seconds each to make their plea, they need all the help they can get.

Even though the Social Innovation Challenge is sometimes described as a *Shark Tank*-style contest for social entrepreneurs, it's more than that. The event does make use of many business buzzwords — incubator, kickstarter, accelerator, innovation hub — but it doesn't attract stereotypical cutthroat types focused solely on juicy profits. Rather, the Challenge encourages entrepreneurs to use their expertise and ingenuity for a greater purpose: finding new solutions to some of the world's troublesome social problems.

The program is backed by the EDGE Network, a General Council unit dedicated to developing new ministries and expressions of what it means to be the church. EDGE pays for staff who plan and develop the Challenge events. This year, the \$18,000 operating budget for logistics and travel comes from the United Church's Youth and Young Adult Ministries unit. Cash prizeing, a total of \$35,000, is from the Glenco Foundation

and Chasing the Spirit (supported by the Mission and Service Fund). And various sponsors donated in-kind prizes, worth \$120,000.

The first Social Innovation Challenge was held in June 2015 in Toronto. Since then, EDGE has hosted similar events in Montreal, Calgary and Winnipeg, and is planning more for Vancouver, Fredericton and Orillia, Ont. Smaller "community-style" challenges are also in the works for Parry Sound, Waterloo and Kingston, Ont. This past May, the Challenge returned to Toronto.

The room quiets when MC Rev. Lauren Hodgson, of St. Matthew's United in Toronto, takes the podium. She begins by explaining the meaning of "triple bottom line," the framework used to evaluate enterprises. Whereas "bottom line" assesses only the financial viability of a business, "triple bottom line" gives equal weight to its financial, social and environmental impacts. To come out on top in this contest, the innovators will need to address all three areas. Further, special recognition will be given to at least one startup that has what Hodgson calls a "quadruple bottom line" — meaning that it also has a spiritual reason for being.

Next come the invited speakers, with inspiring been-there-and-done-that stories proving that social initiatives can indeed be self-sustaining. The keynote speaker is Naresh de Silva of Furniture Bank, a social enterprise that offers furniture removal services and redistributes the items to individuals transitioning out of homelessness. Success stories are also shared by the 2015 winner and runner-up. The more I listen, the

more enthused I become. Good intentions around social change are one thing, but actually turning those intentions into a sustainable business is something else altogether.

One after the other, the 35 nervous-but-excited entrepreneurs file onto the stage and describe, as succinctly as possible, why their initiative should be chosen as one of the finalists. Some have props and posters; others serve their message straight up. Although many are confident and poised, others are decidedly not. Ages range from teens to seniors, and I'm hard-pressed to think of a gender, ethnicity or background not represented. What they all have in common, though, is a palpable passion for making the world a better place.

Occasionally the timer jingles before a presentation is completed. Remarkable in these moments is the compassionate reaction of the competitors in the audience. "Aw, can't they just let him finish?" I hear one



Richard Lam of Landmine Boys (centre) receives a \$2,000 cheque as first place prize. Samantha Irwin (left) and Kagan Mustafa (right), both of XOD Media, also awarded Lam and his partners a new website.

young innovator ask her neighbour amid grumbings of disappointment all around. It seems this is less like a shark tank and more like a school of happy fish, navigating the seas of business development in a collaborative way.

Once the pitching is over, everyone — mentors, contestants, spectators and sponsors — is invited to cast a vote. The top 10 finalists will be revealed the next day.

On day two, the much-anticipated short list is announced right off the bat. The finalists represent a diverse range of issues: solar energy for homes in India (SendMe.Solar); therapeutic horseback riding for the hearing and visually impaired (5 Stars); life coaching for at-risk youth (Shift Happens); companionship services for homeless people (Time Over Dime); training in digital media skills for unemployed youth (CrueTV); reintegration supports for ex-offenders (M.U.S.C.L.E); and more. Each remaining innovator is matched with a professional mentor and sent off to prepare a more focused, in-depth pitch to be presented later that day.

While sipping my coffee and reviewing my notes, I glance around the venue and realize it's as full and bustling as the day before. Strange. Aren't there only 10 contenders left standing? I soon discover that

although this day is mostly about the finalists, all have been invited to stay. With only one exception, everyone accepted, eager to network, collaborate and assist the innovators still in the running.

I flag down Challenge co-ordinator Carla Leon, busy working the room, connecting and encouraging participants, to say how impressed I am about the "losers" sticking around.

"Oh, please," she requests, "let's not use that word. I like to think that everyone ends up with some sort of win." She describes how she's always bombarded with positive feedback after a challenge — mainly from participants who didn't place — thanking her for the enriching experience. Even if innovators aren't awarded a prize, there are other benefits: some form alliances with like-minded entrepreneurs, many improve and/or refocus their plan, others secure funders or mentors, and learning takes place for virtually everyone.

I ask her why The United Church of Canada would develop this program, which at first glance doesn't seem overtly faith-based. "It's part of our mandate at EDGE to reimagine what church can be," she explains. "From our perspective, social innovation and church are the same thing." Churches were "the original social innovators," she says, pointing to

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medicare and CanadaHelps.org, both with church origins, as examples.

Leon also emphasizes the discipleship angle. “Many of these innovators are motivated for holistic reasons, maybe even spiritual ones. They might not call it that, but that’s what it amounts to.” She adds that participants and partners frequently approach her with comments like, “It’s amazing that a faith organization would sponsor something so forward-thinking.” Part of her job, she says, is to help people think differently about faith, so she’s gratified when entrepreneurs, often for the first time, realize that, “Hey, maybe there’s a bigger reason behind why I’m doing this.”

By now it’s late afternoon. The finalists are invited back to the stage to present their new, detailed pitches and to respond to questions from the audience and the panel of six judges: Daniel Graham of Futurpreneur, Darcia Armstrong of the Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses, Jen Bell of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Keith Taylor of DUCA Credit Union, Rajah Lehal of BMW Foundation/Cobalt Counsel and Thulasi Suntharalingam of Innovation Support. As far as I can tell, the innovators have all hit home runs.

When the judges return after about 30 minutes of deliberation, the boisterous room falls silent. The moment has arrived for announcing winners and distributing prizes: cash, plus several other rewards including tablets, business management software, website development and professional consulting services.

Third place (\$1,000) goes to The Canadian Project, an organization that sells Canada-motif apparel to support social and cultural causes. Second place (\$1,500) is 3D 4 MD, which aims to improve health care in remote areas by creating prosthetics and surgical instruments on-site using 3D-printer technology. The top prize (\$2,000) goes to The Landmine Boys, a three-man team from Waterloo, Ont., who have invented a robot that can safely and effectively diffuse landmines. Their innovation has the potential to save thousands of lives and limbs while dramatically reducing the environmental damage caused

by controlled explosion, the current standard method of landmine removal.

The announcement of the top three is a big deal, but for Rev. Rob Dalgleish, executive director of EDGE, the announcement of the People’s Choice Award (\$500) is the most memorable part of the day. Ali Tuckey won the peer-judged award for Safe-T, a program that helps educators and employers relate to queer and trans folks with deeper sensitivity. “Did you notice Ali tear up?” he asks. “That really made me aware of how important an award like this can be. It can give a sense of affirmation to people who are sometimes marginalized.”

The Quadruple Bottom Line prize (\$1,000) is awarded to Ralph Dunham and his team from Ebenezer United in Markham, Ont., for their initiative, Legal Services for Immigrants. “We were actually very surprised,” admits Dunham. “We thought of ourselves as an outreach group, so competing for funds wasn’t something we would have ever con-

sidered on our own. Carla convinced us that what we were doing might resonate here.” The group assists vulnerable immigrants dealing with employment or landlord-tenant issues by connecting them with low-cost or pro-bono legal services.

The event winds down, and I find myself chatting again with Dalgleish. He’s beaming. “Jesus himself was about innovation and change,” he reminds me. “Change of heart, new ways of doing things, and ultimately the transformation of community.”

I observe the innovators, mentors and sponsors packing up while exchanging business cards, handshakes and hugs, and I understand what Dalgleish is getting at. Yes, the Social Innovation Challenge is on one level a business competition; but at its core it’s really about the spirit bringing diverse people together for a greater purpose — much like the United Church itself.

Nancy Fornasiero is a journalist in Oakville, Ont.

Thank you!

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