Tania Del Matto is the director of the GreenHouse program at St. Paul's University College.

Social entrepreneurs grow ideas in GreenHouse

Brent Davis, Record staff

Christina Marchand doesn't hide her enthusiasm for a unique startup program offered through St. Paul's University College in Waterloo.

"We definitely wouldn't be where we are without GreenHouse, for sure," says Marchand, co-founder of a non-profit social enterprise called FullSoul that equips Ugandan hospitals with maternal medical supplies "I think more people need to know about it, and experience it."

When Marchand moved into the GreenHouse program in January 2014, she was in her final months as a student in the University of Waterloo's faculty of applied health sciences.

She and FullSoul's co-founder, Hyder Hassan, had its identity and branding mapped out. But that was about it. Four months in the GreenHouse changed everything. There was the mentorship, the connections to valuable contacts, and peer-to-

peer support and camaraderie from other students in the live-in program. "I always say that I went into GreenHouse with an idea, and I came out with a fully functioning business," Marchand says.

Founded in the fall of 2013, GreenHouse aims to provide a program for young social entrepreneurs that's similar to what's offered for technology startups through programs like Velocity at UW. While some of the initiatives taking shape at Green-House have a technology component — indeed, some students have nurtured an idea at both GreenHouse and Velocity — they're all rooted in social innovation and social entrepreneurship.

"The students that we serve here are really purpose-driven and really passionate about injustices, whether that be in the social space or wanting to take action on environmental issues," says GreenHouse director Tania Del Matto. "I think there's huge power in the two communities collaborating," she says of links to the tech com-

munity. "A lot of our founders have great ideas that are looking to address really pressing needs in our community, but are missing that technical piece."

GreenHouse is open to students in second year and above at UW and Wilfrid Laurier University, across all faculties. It's run through St. Paul's University College, which is affiliated with UW.

Students typically spend a four-month semester in the program, although some have returned for additional terms. The live-in nature of the program provides them with ready support from peers and program staff alike. "Entrepreneurship's a tough thing to do," Del Matto says. "You need to surround yourself with people who are motivated in the same way as you are."

Mentors are available to students, including GreenHouse startup coach Brendan Wylie-Toal, faculty and staff on campus, and individuals in the broader community. When one student wanted to come up with a device that would neutralize

landmines, GreenHouse set up a meeting with St. Paul's chancellor Lloyd Axworthy — a former Minister of Foreign Affairs nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on landmine issues. "We're always striving to hit those kinds of jackpot connections," Del Matto says.

Until now, participation in the program has come in addition to a student's regular course load. A pilot project is launching this fall to offer GreenHouse as a for-credit course for UW students, and there are future plans to offer a credit to Laurier students as well, Del Matto says. "Students are putting in the hours," she says. "It seems to make sense to offer a for-credit stream."

The program is hoping to move into a new building by the fall of 2017. A larger GreenHouse would allow students to live and work under the same roof. Right now, students in the program live in the graduate students' apartment building at St. Paul's. New space would also significantly expand the program's capacity, from 20 students per term to as many as 70. "That's transformative. What does this

Innovating in the GreenHouse

Here are some of the issues explored by students in the GreenHouse program as they develop their ideas for social innovation:
- Problem identification and design thinking
- Idea generation and creative thinking
- Social business canvas
- Market research techniques
- Idea validation and testing
- Storytelling and making the pitch
- Fundraising: Grants, crowdsourcing, angel investing
- How to use a network and a mentor
- Measuring social and environmental impact

mean for the broader community?" Del Matto says. "It's like a talent generator for the social sector."

A fundraising campaign for the new building is expected to start this fall.

The social ventures incubated in GreenHouse include non-profits and for-profits and enterprises that fall somewhere in between. Some students, like Marchand, leave with a business or initiative that they'll continue to grow. Some go

on to work on an idea part-time, or partner with a like-minded organization. Others decide not to pursue an idea any further. "There's not necessarily a defined pathway with these things," Del Matto says. But whatever happens, "they've left our program with some of these tangible skills that they can put into practice."

A social innovation fund launched in 2014 awards $5,000 in total each term to three projects. It's hoped that the fundraising campaign will also help to grow the fund, Del Matto says, so more students can receive assistance.

Recent recipients include Benny Hua, who is creating compression garments for people with lymphedema, Rachel Thompson, who is designing books for older adults with cognitive deficits, and Tina Chan, who is looking to distribute mental health first aid kits for university students.

"The thing that binds our students together is they want to do good, they want to serve their community, they want to have an impact," Del Matto says. ■