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2010-05-11: Ripple effect: the benefits of global learning in action

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Ripple effect: the benefits of global learning in action



Dahlia Hilario, left, with colleague and fellow Northeastern student Johanna Spittle, stand in front of Cape Town's Table Mountain. *Courtesy photo.*

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Guatemala native Dahlia Hilario has wanted to return home to help her poverty-stricken neighbors.

But the Northeastern junior didn't know how to make a lasting impact on her local community until she completed a co-op with a nonprofit institution in Cape Town, South Africa.

Hilario, who is pursuing a degree in **economics**, worked for Mhani Gingi Entrepreneurial Networks, a recently founded micro-finance organization that will give micro-loans to struggling, female entrepreneurs who operate small businesses in nearby townships.

The experiential learning opportunity provided Hilario with the tools to develop a strategy for funding a new elementary school in Chinautla, a village just north of Guatemala City. She is working with her parents, brother and cousins to build the school, and her part of the project will require her to develop a business plan.

Hilario's work is a step in the right direction for a historically poor education system that has helped fuel a culture of pervasive gang violence and corruption, she said.

"This co-op made me realize that you could use micro-finance to help combat poverty," she explained. "It gave me hope to go back and feel that I can do something now.

"I realized that, in Guatemala, if you don't have an education you just stay in a cycle of poverty for the rest of your life," she added. "It angered me to see what my people were going through."

At Mhani Gingi, Hilario helped underprivileged single women start their own small business ventures. She co-wrote a business plan and interviewed several aspiring entrepreneurs who showed promise despite their poor economic standing.

"These women might not have had resources, but they had the potential to do a lot," Hilario said. The nonprofit plans to award three entrepreneurs about \$200 each to start up their businesses, including a jewelry store, a catering company and a fabric stand.

Working for just about any other nonprofit in the world couldn't rival Hilario's experience in Cape Town. "It was a very hands-on experience," she said. "It's amazing to see your work start out as nothing and then have it come to fruition."

Hilario, who lived in a suburb called Pinelands, quickly made friends with local families and grew accustomed to township life. She plans to return to Mhani Gingi after she graduates next year.

The Cape Town co-op was Hilario's second. She previously completed a co-op at PanAgora Asset Management, a Boston-based privately owned hedge fund sponsor.

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