

Exploring Social Entrepreneurship: 'My Generation is Full of Activists and Humanitarians'

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Knowledge@Wharton High School first met Fiorella Riccobono in 2015 when she was a senior in high school. We featured her in a [story](#) about a business class project to promote fair trade practices among Haitian coffee farmers. Now Riccobono, who is 19, is a college student studying finance and interdisciplinary social science with concentrations in economics and social entrepreneurship. In this personal essay, Riccobono talks about how and why she is embracing her calling to become a bold and tenacious change maker.

I just completed my freshman year of college at Florida State University (FSU), and in many ways I am feeling transformed. When you first step foot onto your college campus, the feeling is incredible. You have a sense of personal freedom that you have never experienced. In college, you start to explore your major based on your passion and build the necessary classes and curriculum to earn your degree. Now imagine that the major you chose is an emerging field in the business world. Imagine that it is a new program at your school, and imagine just how much room for growth that opportunity means for you.

That chosen field for me is social entrepreneurship. I fell in love with social entrepreneurship a few years ago when Mrs. Zocco, my business teacher at Edward A. McCarthy High School in Florida, showed me a video of the most genuinely happy and grateful man I had ever seen. He was one of the farmers participating in a fair trade coop in Haiti that our class was helping to run, and his smile was amazing. He was thanking us because now, through fair trade – which in this case was helping coffee farmers in Haiti's poorest region earn a just wage for their very hard work — his children had enough money to go to school. Since that moment, I have been driven to learn all I can about social entrepreneurship and how to make it my life's work.

Leaving the World a Better Place

Many of us want to be extraordinary, to be change makers and to make positive and influential contributions to society. I have discovered that my generation is full of activists, humanitarians and philanthropists. No matter our passions — education, health, environment, economic development — many of us share a common goal: to leave this world a better place than how we found it. I've gathered inspiration from the stories of famous social-justice advocates around the world, like Muhammad Yunus, who created the concept of microfinancing, and Malala Yousafzai, who advocates for women's education. Both Muhammad and Malala are recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Social entrepreneurship is such an emerging concept that it is still not clearly defined. Most importantly, though, it is not charity. Although social entrepreneurs may need to rely on donations to launch their endeavors, they can't create a business model based on donations, because charity is not sustainable. How can you build a business when you don't know where your next dollar is coming from – or when?

In my experience, social entrepreneurs are individuals who draw on innovative business tactics to create solutions to societal issues. Social entrepreneurs combine government, nonprofit and traditional business practices in order to create a sustainable business model that is not only profitable, but also beneficial to the social sector. These innovators create large-scale, systemic and sustainable models by addressing a societal issue at its foundation – poverty, climate change, pollution, whatever it may be. Social entrepreneurs do not have an idea and then apply it. Instead, they go directly to the source of the issue and ask what is needed. Based on that answer, they build their business plans. Social entrepreneurs are often empathetic, bold, open-minded and tenacious.

So, that first day I stepped onto campus, I was more than ready to begin the next phase of my social entrepreneurship journey. The social entrepreneurship culture at Florida State University is growing rapidly. Early freshman year, I met Valarie Rodriguez, who wanted to start the Social Entrepreneurs and Innovators Club at FSU. I was the first person to join the team, and since then two of our board members have created social enterprises that are thriving within the Tallahassee community. Ramon started Unhoused Humanity, which uses crowd funding to help working homeless citizens make the down payment to get into a home. Often, the working poor do not have enough money saved up to make the hefty down payment needed for renting living space — typically first and last month rent and security and utility deposits. But they do generate enough income to pay their monthly rent once they are in. Unhoused Humanity helps the homeless get over that initial down-payment hurdle.

Another one of our members, Nikolas, has started Qultur. Qultur's purpose is to use art to decrease crime in communities. Qultur creates and finds financing for events that bring together local artists, businesses and community members with the premise, "When we support and trust each other, we can live in harmony."

Launching a social entrepreneurship club feels a bit like starting your own business. You have to find funding, promote your mission, explain the concept, and get people invested in your passion. I recruit local entrepreneurs to come speak at our events, plan those events, find funding and sponsors, and educate people on all aspects of social entrepreneurship.

I am getting hands-on social entrepreneurship experience in other ways, as well. The spring semester of my freshman year, I interned with a local fair trade coffee shop in Tallahassee. During that time, my team of interns created a micro social enterprise using the coffee shop's food truck. We were trained as baristas and innovators and were responsible for creating a business model that would be profitable, while also maintaining a social mission.

We researched local areas and events and chose where to take our "fair trade" truck, what beverages we should make, and handled the actual food truck operations. We were the first group of interns to ever break even and create profit for this program. Our business model — like many other social enterprises — addressed a triple bottom line: people, planet and profits. The model had three key features: first, the coffee we brewed was purchased from small farmers who were paid a fair price through certified organic cooperatives. The coffee farms were bird-safe and shade-grown to ensure the organic coffee was environmentally sound. (Coffee farmers sometimes take strides to grow coffee in sunnier settings because it is faster; however, this often damages the biodiversity of the region.) And finally, the coffee shop placed all our profits in local and global humanitarian causes, truly addressing the triple bottom line.

Helping the Homeless

It is immensely inspiring to be part of a community where social justice is a priority. It is motivating to be surrounded by young individuals who are not only incentivized by profit, but by creating systemic change. I believe social entrepreneurship is the future of business and policy making. People are no longer seeing global poverty as a call for charity, but as a place of economic and cultural growth. Young business minds no longer want to exploit our natural resources, rather build business models that protect our environment.

The best advice I can give to incoming freshmen at any school is to be empathetic, bold, open-minded and tenacious. You are about to be exposed to a world of information, opportunity and incredible curiosity. I am as passionate as ever about my social entrepreneurship future. This fall, with the help of my club members, I will be starting a research project at a local homeless shelter. My plan is to speak personally with members of the homeless community in Tallahassee in order to better understand their backgrounds, prior education, work experience and willingness to rejoin the workforce. I want to use this quantitative data to possibly identify a pattern in homelessness. By pinpointing the need, I can create meaningful solutions.

My ultimate goal is to launch a program that rehabilitates the homeless community and reengages homeless people as

active, contributing members of society. My heart tells me that many of them want to improve their circumstances, but need the proper channels for lasting change. I'm not sure how this will all play out, but I have little doubt that we are laying the foundation for something truly extraordinary.