

Bringing solar energy to rural Mexican village

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Some students take on internships to learn what work in the "real world" will be like after graduation. Others get involved in projects in order to learn how to make their post-graduation world more like they want it to be. Audrey Thompson and Tejal Kuray are definitely in the second category.

Both students gained useful experience by joining the SunRazors team, based right here on campus and sponsored by the STEP Center at Hendricks Chapel. Led by SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF) doctoral student Anna Ebers, SunRazors is a multi-dimensional project designed to provide solar energy to the small rural village of Mezquitic, Mexico. Introducing electricity to this "off the grid" community sets the stage for creating a sustainable funding source to maintain the electrical system, improving health and education in the village, enabling economic growth by empowering women and creating a new model for solving problems through international cooperation. The project is small enough to be easy to understand, but multi-faceted enough to provide involvement opportunities for students pursuing pretty much any academic discipline imaginable.

Thompson, a freshman in The College of Arts and Sciences, recently began her SunRazors internship while enrolled in SU's SummerStart program. She was intrigued by the environmental benefits that SunRazors was pursuing. Although she describes herself as "not a science person," Thompson developed a real dedication to sustainability in all its forms. "When I was introduced to environmental science in high

school, I was intimidated," she says. "I was forced to take gym for six years, but no one forced me to take environmental science and I didn't understand why—it's so important!"

By contrast, SUNY-ESF graduate student Kuray completed her initial involvement with SunRazors last May. For her capstone project, Kuray created a template grant proposal to help raise working capital for the renewable electrification project. According to Kuray, "Each foundation [which might be asked to contribute] has its own priorities, so each actual grant proposal will emphasize one or two specific types of benefits. To be useful, the template had to include a description and supporting data for all the various benefits."

Solar energy is the technology that will generate electricity for Mezquitic, but the benefits it will bring include safe drinking water; improved health and safety from refrigerated storage of medicines and vaccines; improved education by allowing increased reading and studying time; decreased burning of candles and kerosene to lower pollution and further improving health; creation of specific economic opportunities for village residents; and—more important—fostering entrepreneurship and market awareness so that villagers will be able to create their own economic opportunities in the future.

While her initial stint with the SunRazors project is already complete, Kuray is hoping to get involved again in the near future. She hopes to write specific grant proposals based on the template she created last spring, enhance an online crowdsourcing effort to provide an alternative funding stream, and perhaps research other similar projects in various parts of the world.

"I loved working on a truly international project without ever having to leave campus," says Kuray. "Building connections, experiencing the influx of creativity that comes from the global team of participants,

expanding my personal skill set—working with SunRazors really opens up your mind."

All of which resonates with Thompson's experiences to date. "I've learned so much already," says Thompson, who describes her work so far as creating the content to establish a social media and web marketing presence for SunRazors. As a result, she's developed an understanding for just how interconnected a lot of social and economic issues really are. And, she's found the international nature of both the project and the team absolutely fascinating.

"Over the summer, almost all the team interactions were virtual," says Thompson. "I've gotten a good understanding of just how powerful social media can be as a tool for projects and for political movements."

While Thompson doesn't yet know just what her internship will involve in the long term, she does know what she wants to focus on for the next week or so. "I want to make more students aware of the SolarDash [two-mile campus fun run/walk on Sept. 14]," says Thompson. "Not every student has the opportunity to be a SunRazors intern, but everyone can get a little exercise, hear a little music, enjoy some light refreshments, and see some amazing craft works created right in Mezquitic."

Anna Ebers started SunRazors in hope of making a difference in the lives of some Mexican villagers. Now she sees how her project can also provide value to students right here on campus, where they learn job-related skills and gather real world experience.

According to Rick Martin of SU's Sustainability Division, that's precisely the sort of experience and perspective students who are interested in sustainability really need. "The issues at the heart of the sustainability challenge aren't addressed by any particular academic discipline," says Martin. "Projects like SunRazors—which is obviously

sustainability related—are really the only way for students to understand how all the different aspects of the challenge affect one another. This is a great project, and I hope students at SU will use it as one model for future efforts and future internship opportunities."

Provided by Syracuse University

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