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News Articles

Harvesting Food and Ideas

Prof opens wallet - and students' minds - in project to help combat hunger in developing world

BY ANDREW VOWLES

A U of G faculty member is digging into his own pocket and into his students' minds to fight world hunger. Prof. Manish Raizada, Plant Agriculture, has set up the Raizada Foundation as a charitable organization to involve

Guelph students in finding cheap prize-worthy ideas and tools to help poor people in developing countries.

This year's inaugural Raizada Prize will be awarded to GrainPro Inc., a Massachusetts-based company whose products — from 10-kilogram grain sacks to 5,000-tonne plastic bunkers — allow individual farmers or co-ops in developing nations to store grains, food and feed. Raizada will pay for \$1,000 worth of the company's storage bags to be sent to farmers in Ghana.

In subsequent years, he plans to offer up to three \$1,000 prizes for entrepreneurs or organizations involved in developing nations.

The dual goal of the classroom-based initiative is to engage his students in international development and to highlight worthwhile projects around the world for much larger funding agencies such as the Bill and Melinda Gates and Rockefeller foundations.

"Young people have good ideas, and we don't harvest them enough," says Raizada. "I'm so excited about this."

The initiative stems from a first-year seminar course he taught last year. In the "Student Philanthropy Project," he challenged 15 students to imagine themselves as members of a charitable foundation looking to support "unsung heroes" in international development.

Among under-recognized projects, individuals and organizations, they found a university student who is building energy windmills in his native Malawi. They also found one of the so-called "lost boys" of the Sudanese civil war who is now living in the United States and is co-founder of a group building a school in southern Sudan.

For these and other projects, Raizada is sending the students' nomination reports to established charities.

He notes that GrainPro's products were a good fit for the project. Lacking equipment to store grain properly, people in developing countries can lose half or more of their yearly harvest to pests and disease spoiling.

That's just one of numerous challenges facing developing nations, he says. Others include lack of access to water, rising prices for imported fertilizer and difficulty in ensuring food safety for export markets. Some 800 million people around the world are chronically malnourished, and more than two billion are poor.

"To get developing economies moving, we have to increase production in agriculture," says Raizada, who studies ways to develop plants that use fertilizer more efficiently.

Joseph Berchie, a PhD student from Africa, recently arrived on campus to analyze nutrient content of groundnuts in Raizada's lab to improve plant breeding in Ghana.

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