Making the Grade
The Gustavson Greenshifters place second in Canada with prize-fetching business idea

By Rachel Goldsworthy

BCom students Vinson Chen, AJ Qin, Jennifer Sallows and Rebecca Staynor, otherwise known as the Gustavson Greenshifters, have enjoyed a record return on investment from a one-day school exercise in 2012. In less than six months, the assignment transformed into a viable business idea, a prize of $15,000 and face time with six top Canadian CEOs.

At the beginning of the school year, Gustavson third-year core students complete the MIISsion Impossible assignment, an exercise building on Gustavson’s pillars: Innovative, International, Integrative and Sustainable/Socially Responsible. Placed in groups of four or five (with one international or exchange student per group), the exercise starts with four hours to brainstorm and hone innovative, sustainable or socially responsible business ideas for the international team member’s home country. The concepts are then presented to academic, community and business judges.

“MIISsion Impossible was one of the best experiences I’ve had in university thus far,” says Staynor. “It threw us into a challenge that we couldn’t prepare for with people we didn’t know, and we truly had to work as a team.” Sallows adds, “As soon as we completed the challenge we knew we had an idea that could really transform into something great.”

So when professor Monika Winn told COM 362 classes about Walmart Canada’s Green Student Challenge, it seemed natural for the Greenshifters to sign up with their MIISsion Impossible business idea. From 150 groups and individuals across the country, Walmart long-listed the Greenshifters along with 19 other teams, all of whom were asked to submit more detailed, eight-page business summaries.

The Greenshifters’ concept tackled business, sustainability and social responsibility in one elegant, simple plan. Marginalized workers in China would collect used chopsticks from restaurants, improving China’s unemployment problem, and divert up to 45-billion pairs of chopsticks from the landfill. The chopsticks would then be processed into oriented strand board for upmarket furniture, to be sold in the global marketplace.

Walmart Canada’s selection committee loved the plan, so on February 26, 2013, the Greenshifters travelled to the Toronto finals where, with four other teams, they presented their ideas to a who’s who in Canadian business.

Chen championed the concept to the judges. “Our idea is not only exciting and unique because we’re transforming old chopsticks into furniture,” he said, “we’re also creating value throughout the supply chain while benefitting multiple stakeholders.”

Shelley Broader, president and CEO of Walmart Canada, expressed her appreciation to the Gustavson crew. “I thought you did a wonderful, well-coordinated presentation—it was fantastic.” The Greenshifters would go on to win second place—and $15,000.

The real prize, however, was the opportunity itself. “It was the most amazing experience in my life,” says Qin. “For an undergraduate student it might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I learned a lot of new green ideas, but also it was a great chance to network with top CEOs.”

Chen concludes, “I wanted to let people know that even a small and simple idea such as ours can have an extraordinary impact on the world. I hope our idea is an inspiration to look more closely at our actions and the world around us.”

BY THE NUMBERS
45 billion = pairs of disposable wooden chopsticks sent to landfill in China every year
16-25 million = number of trees felled each year to make chopsticks
$100,000 = start-up costs for the Greenshifters’ idea
$2.6 million = projected annual revenue

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