

September 23, 2010

MSLOC Student Rashaun Sourles Wins Entrepreneur Award for Green Business

By Marilyn Sherman

EVANSTON, Ill. --- Plain old barley straw is the main ingredient in an environmental start-up business that won an entrepreneur award for Rashaun Sourles, a student in the Master of Science in Learning and Organizational Change (MSLOC) program.

The green business he runs with a friend, Blue Water Ponds, became a semifinalist in the Minnesota Cup entrepreneurial contest, where the pair won \$5,000 in seed money. The start-up provides an ecological solution for cleaning up murky ponds with barley straw and weed harvesting.

Sourles credits MSLOC with getting him started as an entrepreneur. "A class taught by Dorie Blesoff, Designing Sustainable Strategic Change, lit my entrepreneurial fire!" he explains. With Blesoff, Sourles explored issues such as "How does one create a social value proposition? What are the routes to funding for these types of ventures?"

Sourles's partner in Blue Water Ponds, Ben Schurhamer was a biochemistry major at the University of Minnesota when he discovered a method for using barley straw as a water clarifier in local ponds and lakes. "It worked well and customers started adopting it as an alternative to using herbicides on their ponds," says Sourles, who acts as a strategy and execution consultant for Blue Water Ponds and a related product as the business scales up and pursues patent protection and franchising.

He is an MSLOC student living in Minneapolis and an account manager at Johnson & Johnson, taking advantage of MSLOC's part-time alternative schedule format that combines on-campus sessions with online learning.

"The value that I bring to the team that has been directly influenced by my participation in the MSLOC program falls into two categories: whole-systems change theory and the use of storytelling as a way of promoting our core strategy," he notes. He explains whole-systems change as "understanding that we all have shared interests, but that those interests will remain unseen unless we bring a broader mix of stakeholders to the table. It's about finding opportunities that have the lowest cost throughout the system."

“Ben came to me to help tell his story. ... We look forward to telling our story to media outlets, investors and new customers as the company grows and evolves.”

According to Sourles, Blue Water Ponds provides environmentally friendly services for restoring ponds through the use of barley straw and pond weed harvesting in an effort to control aquatic plants long-term. Barley straw is believed to act as a stable food source for microbes that live within freshwater environments, and as they multiply and compete with other organisms for food, the net effect is a clearer pond or lake in about four weeks. “Therefore we can achieve the similar results as the toxic and corrosive herbicides -- whose long-term effects we are just beginning to fully understand -- without killing anything,” Sourles says.

The Minnesota Cup, a statewide entrepreneurial contest that seeks out and supports Minnesota’s newest and most innovative business ideas. The 6th Annual Minnesota Cup is a statewide competition that seeks out aspiring entrepreneurs with breakthrough business ideas.

Marilyn Sherman is the director of communications and outreach at the School of Education and Social Policy. Contact her at marilyn-sherman@northwestern.edu.

