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Inspiration and collaboration propel winning EyeTalk team

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EyeTalk is the Challenge Champion of the 2013 Business Plan Challenge. Eyetalk developed a pair of glasses that can help the visually impaired hear written text. From left, FIU Business Professor Seema Pissaris, Jesus Amundarain, Pia Celestino, Michael Arbitman, sight impaired, Viurniel Sanchez, and Esam Mashni, right, make up the EyeTalk team.

EyeTalk began as a Florida International University business professor's social entrepreneurship challenge to students last fall.

Four students who stepped up — Viurniel Sanchez, Jesus Amundarain and Esam Mashni, all engineering graduate students, and Pia Celestino, a communications undergraduate who graduated last week — not only came up with a prototype for an innovative pair of glasses to help the severely visually impaired to hear written text, they also produced a solid business plan to bring it to market. EyeTalk is the first-place winner in the Business Plan Challenge FIU Track and was named the Challenge Champion.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. This is a story of the power of intra-collegiate team work, inspiration from the target market, mentorship and social entrepreneurial spirit.

As the team members — all of whom also have full-time jobs in their fields — began narrowing in on a project, Sanchez thought about a target-recognition technology that he, Amundarain and Mashni had developed in a senior research project funded by NASA and the Department of Defense. Why couldn't that help the blind navigate their environment? The three engineering students, who have Dominican, Venezuelan and Palestinian roots, put together a prototype and the technology worked.

"We thought it was a great idea at the moment, and boy it has picked up a lot of steam," said Sanchez, alluding to what would come next.

College of Business professor Seema Pissaris, an entrepreneur who founded Games Trader, a company that went public on the Toronto Stock Exchange, has mentored them at every step of the way, said the team. She encouraged Celestino, who has her own social media and marketing firm, crea7ive, to join the team.

Celestino, who moved here with her family during the Argentine financial crisis, said she became engaged with social entrepreneurship after Pissaris encouraged her to attend an Ashoka conference. "When I went there, I was blown away because I saw normal people — not

millionaires or rich boys — doing amazing things" with their social entrepreneurial ventures and projects, said Celestino.

The turning point for the EyeTalk team, Pissaris said, was when the students met with Miami social entrepreneur Michael Arbitman, a computer science engineer who lost his sight six years ago. Arbitman created Imuneek.com, a website designed for the disabled to share resources and connect with service providers. "I want it, I want it, oh my god the potential. It will change my life," said Arbitman about the EyeTalk product, explaining that the glasses will enable him to do everyday things like read to his daughter or shop for a shirt, as well as potentially life-saving functions like read medication bottles and operate his insulin pump. "I want to have the ability to do things on my own again. There is so much power in those glasses, so much power."

Said Pissaris: "Suddenly there was this new purpose and new vision, and there was this new energy, and this propelled the group."

The professor also encouraged them to compete in an international contest. The FIU team's early prototype, known as the FreedomLens, was one of 16 semifinalists from 29 nations that was presented at the 2013 Global Social Entrepreneurship Competition in February at the University of Washington in Seattle. One judge said it had the potential to create an entire new market.

Since then, organizations for the blind have been reaching out to the team, expressing the need for the technology. Arbitman, who has continued as an advisor to the team. has been keeping the blind community up to date on his website and they are excited about it.

The team registered the company and filed for a patent. EyeTalk is continuing to refine the prototype and has been exploring manufacturing in China, India and Mexico to keep the price low, said Sanchez. Although EyeTalk is in the development stage, the team hopes to sell the glasses for about $200 and wants to partner with organizations such as Lighthouse for the Blind that could provide the glasses for free to those who can't afford them. According to the business plan, EyeTalk projects startup costs at $300,000 and a loss in year one, but sees sales reaching $18 million in three years.

Amundarain and Mashni said the next step is further testing and improving the product for durability. They are building the product so that it can be updated with other features as they are developed, such as one in which EyeTalk can help individuals navigate without a walking stick, and another for translations in multiple languages. They are exploring launching a KickStarter campaign to raise initial funds for production. Ultimately, EyeTalk is seeking $300,000 in initial funding to take EyeTalk to market, the team said in its plan.

Pissaris said a project like this can not only help students find their passion but also help them understand the complexity of launching and operating a business. Can they pull it off? "They are very driven, very ambitious and incredibly talented. Their passion is infectious. Yes, I absolutely believe that they will do it." said Pissaris.

The early progress has even surprised the hard-working team. "At first we didn't believe in ourselves," said Sanchez. But lately many things have been coming together. "Every time we get results, it drives us onward."

Arbitman and the blind community is rooting for them. "That gives us such motivation to keep going," added Amundarain.