Dream to Provide Science Supplies in Africa Wins $7,500 Ag Springboard Top Prize

Posted: April 15, 2015

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A nonprofit venture to provide basic laboratory equipment to high school science students in West African countries won the $7,500 grand prize Tuesday in the Ag Springboard student business pitch competition.

Bridge the GapSci is the brainchild of five Ph.D. students, two of whom grew up in Ghana, who are aware both of the void of basic laboratory equipment for high school students in Africa—and the abundance of surplus and “gently used lab” equipment available in the United States.

The team plans to match sources of lab glassware, gloves, coats and pipettes with West African countries, starting with Ghana, to allow students to conduct experiments and learn science hands-on. Sixty percent of labs in secondary schools in Africa don’t have working equipment and 40 percent don’t have labs.

“A little education and exposure can change your entire trajectory in life,” said team member Josephine Garban, a Ph.D. student in molecular medicine, during the team’s presentation in Tuesday’s final round of the Ag Springboard competition. Their goal is to help elevate society and opportunities in West Africa by providing tools for science and innovation.

“I can exhale now,” said team leader Kerry Belton, a Ph.D. student in molecular toxicology, after the announcement. “I smiled for five minutes straight.”

Ag Springboard is a signature event of the Entrepreneurship & Innovation Program at the College of Agricultural Sciences, and made possible with the financial support of donors like Earl and Kay Harbaugh.

Kronkos Farms, pitching a plan to use biotechnology to bring saffron production to the United States, won the $2,500 second place prize. The team’s concept is to use biotechnology to decrease labor, and increase yield and quality of a domestic saffron crop. The team members are Joanna Hofstaedter, a junior secondary education biology major; Tina Shing Li Lai, an M.S. student in plant biology, Nate Hamaker, a junior double-major student in chemical engineering and plant biology and Kristen Fisher, an environmental resource management major graduating in May.

Five student teams advanced to the final round, following a video submission of their pitch for a new product, service or non-profit. Runners up were: Protein Station, Delivered U and bluHouse.
Keynote Speaker Dr. Nina Jenkins, CEO of ConidioTec and senior research associate in the college's Department of Entomology, told her story of developing a biopesticide for locusts that was effective and scientifically successful. However, it was not commercially successful and she is now using the lessons from that 12-year project to commercialize a biopesticide for bed bugs.

Jenkins also said scientists can absolutely make great entrepreneurs — despite what some people have advised.

Scientists who have the passion to start a business based on a discovery are often the best people to commercialize since they know the product or technology better than anyone else, said Jenkins.