

Eisenhower Fellowships Youth Leaders

- A Lifelong Journey

By Alberto Niego (Perú)

With great shame is that I rang Juan Jose one day to converse with him about the reasons why I was no longer pursuing the project I had been working under his mentorship; for the second time. It was another failed attempt to start a high-impact project this year. I felt like the commitment I made with EF, my mentor and myself, to take full advantage of this opportunity to make the world a bit better, was falling apart. For that reason, it took me a while to think of the right words to craft the perfect pitch that would allow me to explain the rationale of dropping the project, fearful of what he might say in response. Yet, what he told me could not have been further away from what I expected as an answer from a mentor like him:

“The most important project you have under your belt, is yourself.”

With that, my Fellow mentor gave me great insight into what the Eisenhower Fellowship (EF) Youth Leader (YL) Journey was all about. Almost a year ago, a group of passionate, energetic, idealistic, talented, and impatient group of young people gave an identity to EF's first-ever young cohort. Thirty-two young community leaders from twenty different countries around the world embarked themselves in an expedition to the core of their strengths and weaknesses, dreams and fears, powers and handicaps, in order to carve their talents and accomplish their goals. The journey consisted in a year-long program to develop a project idea that would positively impact a community, while being mentored by an Eisenhower Fellow.

Having a mentor like Juan Jose Güemes proved to be critical for my development. Despite the fact that we did not know each other before the program started, that he has an

extremely busy agenda, and that we were in two vastly different time zones, Juan Jose managed to transfer some wisdom, which I take with me in everything I do:

1. **Lead with Actions:** As a high-profile change-maker Juan José has managed to create lasting positive impact in various different communities. When I was first told about him, I read various articles on him and became undoubtedly impressed and humbled to have Juan Jose as my mentor as I realized that he epitomizes the vision of the Fellowship. Yet, during all this time, he never mentioned to me his achievements, certificates, previous titles, or any other means of self-recognition. He taught me the importance of staying humble and hungry for learning. I learned that is not with words that one earns respect, but with actions.
2. **Focus on yourself:** It is easy to get caught-up in the short-term and allow life to just pass by if one does not have a burning passion, an intention, or a goal in mind. Throughout my conversations with Juan Jose, he helped me find and define my personal goals, and motivated me to focus on myself –on my personal and professional growth. Taking time to develop oneself might be the single most valuable lesson I have internalized in the past years, as I feel much more confident and ready to transmit that value through my endeavors.
3. **Seek synergies:** When I was mumbling my reasons to desist from continuing to work on the project to focus on other opportunities I had, Juan Jose told me: “As you grow and get better at what you do, you will receive and seek more and more opportunities to get involved in. And as important as it is to learn to say ‘no’ to many of those, it is equally important to say ‘yes’ to those opportunities that create a synergic bond with your skills, area of expertise, and other endeavors.” With that he gave me the encouragement I needed to choose and pursue valuable opportunities and focus on getting closer to my grand personal goal.

When I joined the cohort and met Juan Jose, I had no idea that the most pivotal year in my career was about to start. I was clear on my future plans yet lost in the present moment. I

was convinced I wanted to build a path for myself towards becoming a social entrepreneur in Latin America in ten years. Unsure of what “social entrepreneur” meant as well as why was I fixed with Latin America, I felt deep inside of me that I should focus my actions as well as seek synergies towards this path.

The opportunities that distracted me from pursuing the project indeed tested the learnings before mentioned. I was offered to move to Silicon Valley to work as a Product Specialist for Facebook, and also, to move to Colombia to lead the design and execution of a social business in education technology for Open English. The former meant adding a great section for my CV, working for one of the most powerful corporations in the world, and living in the capital of innovation. Yet the latter meant an on-the-ground learning experience, working hand-in-hand with the C-level of a successful startup, and setting my roots in Latin America.

My EF YL journey consisted in much more than a tangible project. It consisted in giving me permission to work on myself, the means to decide on less conventional paths, and in the encouragement and patience I needed to better focus on accomplishing my personal as well as my professional goals. It provided me with the opportunity to meet and build a relationship with a mentor that became fundamental for my development. The EF Journey gave me the courage to analyze and understand the circumstances and proudly say that I am now in Colombia putting all my heart, brain and soul, in building from the ground up a promising social business in Latin America.

So, what’s next?

A year ago the EF YL Journey began with thirty-two young community leaders from around the world. We forged meaningful bonds, ignited a powerful spark, and departed like missionaries motivated to make the world a better place, one community at a time. Some may have found roadblocks along the way while some others might have started bigger things than whatever they ever imagined. Yet, the important thing is that as far as that spark stays alive, the Eisenhower Fellowships Youth Leader’s Journey will forever continue.

