

“BREAKING THE HOMELESS CYCLE”:

Honors College Student Works to Provide Jobs for the Homeless

April 2nd, 2014 (Jupiter, FL)—Students at Florida Atlantic University’s Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College are encouraged to pursue interests outside of their fields of study and to develop diverse skills outside of the classroom. For a select group of students, the Kenan Social Engagement Program allows them to do just that, and to receive funding to put their innovative ideas to good use. Benjamin Arsali, a junior at the Harriet L. Wilkes Honors College, has always had a passion for business. At the age of eight he began investing in commodities and stocks, and at the age of fourteen he began to work for a local property investing firm; however, he always had the desire to do something in which he could also give back to his own community. “It was my goal to give back to the area which I call home, and through the Honors College Kenan Social Engagement Program I discovered that not only could I start a business but I could also simultaneously improve my community,” explains Arsali.

The Kenan Social Engagement Program focuses on teaching students about social entrepreneurship, helping students to develop a plan to address a social need, developing relations between the students and nonprofit organizations, and on providing the funds these young entrepreneurs need to carry out their business plans. Students interested in the program enroll in a one-semester course designed to help them develop a comprehensive business plan for a social venture of their own creation. Once the students complete their business plans, they submit them for review to a panel of judges selected by the Kenan Foundation, and the top five business plans are selected to receive funding. These five young entrepreneurs are awarded a \$2,500 seed grant to start up their project, as well as \$2,000 to cover living expenses while their project is being initiated over the summer, and a \$2,000 academic scholarship. In addition to these funds and awards, the business plan that is most likely to make a positive impact in the community is selected and awarded an additional \$15,000 seed grant.

This year, Arsali’s Maintenance Magicians, a nonprofit organization that will provide property maintenance services in Palm Beach County, caught the eye of the judges, and was awarded the \$15,000 seed grant. Arsali’s innovative idea seeks to solve two of Palm Beach County’s most persistent problems using existing resources. Due to recent economic changes resulting in a large number of foreclosures, Palm Beach County has recently found itself with a great deal of unmanaged properties, left in various states of disrepair. Even though these homes and properties may be vacant and in the hands of private institutional investors, Palm Beach County still requires the maintenance of them to protect the safety, welfare, and public health of residents through various codes and ordinances. “Maintenance Magicians will provide reliable services at a competitive price, which include painting, window cleaning, pressure washing, landscape maintenance and general upkeep, and it will also help break the cycle of homelessness in Palm Beach,” explains Arsali. Maintenance Magicians plans to partner with the Lord’s Place, a local non-profit organization that has worked with the homeless community for over 30 years,

to form a workforce consisting of Palm Beach County residents who are, or who recently have been, homeless. Once a team of 4-8 employees is trained and employed, Magic Magicians will then reach out to the banks currently partnered with the Lord's Place and offer to service the properties they hold within the county. Within four years, Arsali projects large growth rates for his company and expects to meet his goal of employing 50-100 homeless people through successful long- and short-term property maintenance contracts. As their reputation grows in the local area, Maintenance Magicians plans on forming business partnerships with institutional investors, homeowners' associations, and commercial developments.

Given the long process, constant challenges, and time dedicated to develop this project, Arsali is extremely thankful for the guidance and suggestions he has received from his mentors and advisors, Dr. Christopher Strain and Dr. Timothy Steigenga who are the faculty directors for the Social Kenan Entrepreneurship program. Creating a business from the ground up can be daunting, and is rarely something to be tackled in a classroom setting. For Arsali, the most challenging aspect of this project has been working to start the business and make it profitable on a very tight schedule. Nevertheless, he has been working hard and is in the process of seeking potential employees. He plans to start at a small scale this summer and continue to expand as time allows it.

The most rewarding aspect for Arsali is the opportunity to give homeless individuals a fresh start, a stable income, essential job skills, and employment records. He believes that if he can improve the life of at least one person, then the amount of time he has dedicated to this project will be well worth it. "Great opportunities like this are not available at most universities; this brings out the uniqueness of the Honors College. I would definitely recommend this to any student, even if they are not majoring in Business or Economics," says Arsali. As an Honors College student, Arsali also plans to use his business plan as the basis for his senior thesis with the help of his advisor, Dr. Kanybek Nurtegin, during the upcoming academic year. More importantly, though, Arsali hopes that this opportunity will afford him the chance not only to develop skills that he will carry with him into his academic and professional future, but to change the community around him in a positive way. He is another excellent example of an Honors College student dedicated to improving not only themselves, but also improving the lives of others.