

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Do not bring medals with you

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Destination: Ruchi NGO, Himachal Pradesh, India

The title says it all. On this journey of discovery from San Giobbe to Himachal Pradesh, Filippo Spaliviero has set his heart on working for an international non-profit organization, and the Ca Foscari for the World project has offered him just such an opportunity. He throws himself enthusiastically into a recycling venture in a village in the mountains of northern India. But when the time comes to leave, he gets a shock. Instead of thanking him for his selfless generosity and humanitarian ideals, the local NGO moderator tells him that, even if he's done a great job, he shouldn't think of it as simply due to his merit. 'And when you go on – she adds, – do not take any medals with you'. This sobering remark hits hard, but the protagonist takes it as an eye-opener, because 'incredible India, you will always shine in memories more than the brightest medal I could sling around my neck'.

2015, 14th September, San Giobbe Campus, my first Principles of Management lecture.

The professor is watching us firmly from behind his glasses, as he briefly says: – Gentlemen, as we start this course, keep in mind that here your goal is only one: to learn how to make a profit in the market environment –.

I was a young man who had pondered to study philosophy, but had turned to economics as I sought a sense of concreteness. That statement made me feel a bit out of place. I raised my hand: – What if our business burns the Amazon rainforest: shouldn't we take such ethical implications into consideration? – I'll never forget his sharp reply: – You should better leave your ethics outside of this room, I am sorry.

So I did, I banished my ethics from the classroom. Thing is, I also followed them...

2017, 17th December, Barotiwala College, a small university in Himachal Pradesh, northern India. I'm with Diletta, the other intern working at RUCHI NGO (Rural Center for Human Interests). We're introducing the principal, Mrs Madhu-ji, to our Waste Force project, about rural recycling. She carefully listens to us explaining everything about the monthly collection and segregation we planned. Her head nods in that peculiar way that Indians have mastered to tell you they are following what you are saying. This charming Sikh lady sprinkles positivity and looking straight into our eyes, she says: – I've been waiting a long time for someone like you to provide a recycling structure. Doing it alone was unfeasible! – and then she outlined some ideas on how to further improve our plan.

You see, I realized that my ideal job is to work for an international non-profit organization and that a management major is exactly what will lead me there. So I kept studying, and when I heard about the Ca' Foscari for the World project, I applied immediately and flew to India to test my dreams on the field.

When I arrived in September 2017, in the middle of nowhere, I was overwhelmed. Green mountains and scattered villages of just a few hundred farmers willing to drink a tea with me, sharing their joyful peacefulness. It didn't take long to start feeling at home.

However, our second reaction was grief. The amount of garbage in the streets was immense, when you didn't feel its burning smoke scorching your lungs. The government hadn't yet provided any system for recycling.

A thought struck me: 'Why don't we rent a truck and collect the trash in these villages? There's an industrial area close-by, where we can recycle...'

So I asked Mr Dharamvir, our NGO site director, for his opinion, and he gave us the go ahead.

Diletta and I were in complete charge of this new project. Professionally, we grew into the role quickly. She mastered her spoken Hindi and after a couple of weeks we could go to villages alone. When the question arose about motivating the local children to recycle, we had to be creative. So we developed a game whereby the kids had to look at pictures of bananas, bottles, cigarettes and guess how long it took them to decompose and what they could do to get rid of this garbage. Candies were a most effective method, but our public speaking skills were improving too, becoming more effective with older children.

The adults were more difficult to convince. They were resistant to change - it was only by going there day in and day out, showing the benefits of our work, that slowly drew their support. The children though - their enthusiastic smiles showed us they sincerely believed in the project. Some of them even volunteered for a clean-up event in front of the local market. Shopkeepers nodded approvingly.

Schools' headmasters usually supported us from the beginning, but it was often the case that people did not understand why to participate.

I remember a young woman saying: - Hey, you claim that burning plastic is bad for our health, but we have done it for years and nobody died so far... you must be lying -. Sitting in the middle of this ladies' group, Diletta and I looked at one another with surprise and helplessness. We looked for the eyes of Mrs Pushplata-ji, our NGO group moderator, but she didn't know what to say. Probably she had the same doubts. Clearly, follow-up projects were needed.

Four days before returning to Italy, Diletta and I were having a chai and biscuits in Madhu-ji's office. It was an interesting conversation: she shared the principles of the Sikh religion, and various life experiences. At a certain point, she said: - Well Filippo, you have done a great job, but

please do not think that this is to your merit. You have just made yourself available, but in the end, you should feel lucky you could start the project.–

These words truly hit me. I didn't see it in this way at all. I mean, I was the one who initiated everything, wasn't I? She explained: – Don't get me wrong, your decision was important, but do you really believe you could do it if the Universe did not prepare this path, this opportunity for you? – I felt she was very right. It was an eye-opener.

– And when you go on, do not bring medals with you, – she continued, – leave past successes behind you, and look forward to letting yourself achieve something new, wherever you will be.

I wish I had more time to talk to her, but our driver was hitting impatiently the horn: we said goodbye, we had to leave.

A few days later I said my final farewell. Actually, her words helped me realize it will be the people, the friendships, the ones I would miss the most.

Dhanyavad, incredible India, you will always shine in memories more than the brightest medal I could sling around my neck.

