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Spotlights

GREG VAN KIRK

LESSONS LEARNED

At the age of 30, Greg Van Kirk '91 made a bold, and in the eyes of his peers—incomprehensible—decision. After four and a half years in investment banking, he quit his job to join the Peace Corps.

After his stint with the corps ended, Van Kirk stayed on in Guatemala for eight years as a social entrepreneur, co-founding the Community Enterprise Solutions as well as Social Entrepreneur Corps and Ayudasoft LLC. He has been recently honored as an Ashoka Fellow, and now lives with his family in New York City.

While visiting Miami, Van Kirk shared some of his thoughts—and philosophy—with FSB staff writer Denise Spranger.

Did you know what you wanted to do with your life when you were still in school?

When I first came to Miami, I was a marketing major. I can't say that I had any great ideas about what I wanted to do after school. But I studied in Luxembourg in the fall semester of my junior year in 1989 when the Berlin wall came down. So I had the opportunity to go to Czechoslovakia and East Berlin as all of this was going on. I think something inside of me knew then that I wanted to work in a very challenging foreign environment. There's just something about that that gets my juices flowing.

Did the degree you got here at FSB prepare you well for what you're doing now?

Most definitely. From the friendships and relationships that I built to the more academic aspect, I think my whole experience prepared me well—including my experience in Luxembourg.. When I went taught in Japan after graduation, and then went into banking, I had a good understanding of how to approach problems. So my education at FSB was a very important building block.

Do you have any advice for students who are in the classrooms right now – anything you wish that someone would have told you?

I think that there is the natural tendency to treat school as a stepping stone to a job. Students think: "I've got to finish this, work on my resume, and then go apply." It's the tendency to lay out your next steps. I think what that means is that people don't take as many risks.

I came to look at my twenties as "research and development." I decided at the time that when I turned 30, after I'd learned all of these different things, I'd figure out what I wanted to do. And it was true. By then I had a much better idea.

My best advice: Remember that there is no straight path. Gaining more life experiences can actually help you to be better at what you'll do. So don't worry about it. You'll figure it out. Don't put so much pressure on yourself.

What have been your greatest obstacles?

One of the most challenging things has been strengthening my weaknesses. When I graduated, I wasn't very detail-oriented. I didn't really like math, and I wasn't very good at it. So when I first worked in banking, I fell on my face. It wasn't pretty. But that was a wonderful opportunity for me to learn to become very good at something that I hadn't been.


We tend to go toward our strengths. But I think especially post-graduation, try to work somewhere where you're not only playing into your strengths, but where you're dealing with your weaknesses. I think it's important to continually step a little outside your comfort zone, and then just step a little bit



Greg Van Kirk is co-founder of Community Enterprise Solutions, the Social Entrepreneur Corps, Ayudasoft, LLC and an Ashoka Fellow.

further. The whole point is to focus on where you want to go.

Do you enjoy your work?

Ever since I went to Guatemala, I really don't think there has been one day when I've woken up and thought, "I've got to go to work." I guess that's the answer. I love what I do and I think that I've found my passion. Hopefully I'll do this for the rest of my life. 

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