

Public health student rolls with high-pressure competition on Startup Bus

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Helen Waller, a graduate student in the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, delivers a pitch on the Startup Bus in July. The three-day bus trip served as an incubator for businesses and entrepreneurs. (Photo by Odysseas Chloridis)

Helen Waller was a teacher in Myanmar before she began master's studies at the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. All the while, she watched with interest as her friends and students forged a new path for technology in that country. This summer, she earned firsthand tech experience on the Startup Bus, an initiative that brings together potential entrepreneurs.

In July Waller traveled to Washington, D.C., and boarded a Startup Bus that was, coincidentally, bound for New Orleans. The goal: Over three days, the participants — strangers from random backgrounds — form teams, develop a concept, create original software and secure new users — while the bus is rolling between cities.

Now her team's project, Office PE, which matches trainers with employee wellness programs for exercise sessions in the office environment, is officially a startup.

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Startup Bus was a wild ride. The first round of pitching took place within three hours of the bus's departure, before participants even knew how well the wi-fi worked. Once her team formed, there was plenty of opportunity for on-the-spot problem-solving, such as growing a Twitter audience quickly or resolving software problems with limited resources.

"That was something I went in for, definitely," she said. "And I think I did realize how constructive that can be on a personal level and then also on a structural level, like when you're trying to put a business together. It's important to be that vulnerable, to keep seeking new information as much as possible."

Waller's team bonded, but the confines of the bus and the pace of the work would test her mettle. For instance, practicing the "pitch" was constant, even when she had other work to finish.

There were times when "I just [wanted] to sit down and write. But you have to get up and pitch again, and it's probably 4% better than the last time — but it's better," she said.

"It's all part of the gamble that you're taking getting on that bus," she added.

No matter how many times she stood up to pitch a project, she tried to tap into what drove the startup's mission. Picturing tired, sluggish employees, for example, who can't be productive because they are stuck too long at a desk, helped fuel her presentations.

When the bus finally rolled into New Orleans, Waller and her team had working software and a viable business plan. Startup Buses from other cities convened in New Orleans as well, and 26 teams eventually went into rounds of competition at Propeller and the Mahalia Jackson Theater. Office PE did not win, but the project is a reality, and Waller's three teammates are still business partners.

Though she'll soon be starting a position in water governance and disaster mitigation with the state, Waller hopes to pull together a group of intrepid New Orleanians for next year's Startup Bus.

"It takes all kinds of small challenges and changes to come up with the best solutions."