

Students showcase ideas for the greater good

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newwave@tulane.edu



Tulane University senior Sunshine Best was one of 24 student participants to receive feedback on their social innovations during the Taylor Student Showcase this semester. (Photo by Ryan Rivet)

The [Taylor Student Showcase](#), organized by the [Phyllis M. Taylor Center for Social Innovation and Design Thinking](#), is paving the way for social innovators at Tulane University. One such innovator is senior Sunshine Best, a health and wellness major in the [School of Professional Advancement](#) who used the showcase to pitch her software designed to change the way knowledge about traditional gardening is communicated.

To prepare, Best traveled to different countries for two years on an educational research trip called the “Global Community Knowledge Project.” During the trip she

collected information for her software. Taking inspiration from Google and Wikipedia, she eventually created the prototype for an online database to preserve traditional plant-based knowledge, share techniques for sustainability and connect community gardeners.

The software is called AmnAya, a Sanskrit term meaning “instruction in past and present usage.” In addition to containing a large database, AmnAya also includes geolocation software to help growers see what others in similar climates are planting.

“AmnAya redefines community gardening because the whole world becomes a community,” Best said. “I was frustrated by the fact that a lot of cultures look down on indigenous culture for their medicine because they think it’s just old folk knowledge. But so much information on the software is validated by evidence-based studies.”

The showcase is a culminating event for the [Changemaker Institute](#) (CI), an 8-week social venture accelerator that supports student changemakers by fostering learning and growth via experiential learning, community partnerships, mentorship and the development of social entrepreneurial skills.

“A large part of CI is becoming more aware of social problems students wish to tackle, using human-centered design to better understand and meet potential users’ needs and articulating the social mission of students’ social ventures,” said Julia Lang, program manager for social innovation programming at Taylor. “Hopefully this is just the beginning of students sharing their ideas, getting feedback and tackling social issues they care about.”

Lang initially recommended that Best join CI to help refine her ideas. Best’s participation allowed her to put her ideas into action.

“People would tell me that what I’m doing is impossible and it’s too big,” Best said. “Dr. William Balée, Julia Lang and Dr. Mark Wilson really understood the importance of this project. They saw it as possibility as opposed to an impossibility. I am so grateful to them.”

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