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Beyond Profits

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Colin Johnson has started a business in his family's dining room that is helping families 1,800 miles away build sturdier homes in one of the poorest countries in Latin America.

The 19-year-old University of Dayton entrepreneurship major last summer launched Hammocks That Help, a business that sells colorful, handmade Nicaraguan hammocks in the U.S. But he's not pocketing all the profits -- or taking any naps.

Johnson has partnered with the 4 Walls Project, a Rochester, N.Y., non-profit organization that donates materials and coordinates volunteers to help build brick houses for $2,000 apiece in the rural town of El Sauce, Nicaragua. Whenever Johnson, of Webster, N.Y., sells 100 hammocks, he helps a rural family trade their crumbling house constructed out of tarp and timber for a sturdier brick one. The first one will be built this month for a young family with a 1-year-old daughter.

"I always wanted to start my own business, and I love social entrepreneurship -- the aspect of giving back to people in need," said Johnson, who traveled to Nicaragua for two weeks last summer and found himself drawn to the intricate art of hammock-making. "You can see the talent and passion that goes into each and every hammock," he said. "It takes three people 12 hours to make just one. Everything is handwoven."

By the end of the trip, Johnson hammered out a deal with a small hammock company and invested $5,500 in start-up capital to buy his first shipment of 100 hammocks and special product tags that describe the venture. Soon, the family dining room was converted into an inventory area. "I have a ton of hammocks stacked up in my bedroom, too," he said with a laugh.

Hammocks That Help offers three styles for $70, $80 or $95. They can be ordered online at hammocksthathelp.com.

While the company isn't breaking even just yet, Johnson is intent on dividing any future profits with the 4 Walls Project.

"I have a great family, a great education and great friends. That's why I've always felt that giving back to people less fortunate than me is important," he said.

Johnson credits his parents -- one a financial adviser, the other a real estate agent -- for their belief in him. "They were a little nervous when I went to Nicaragua, a third-world country so far away, but they've been awesome all the way. They told me to go for it."

This is not Johnson's first venture in entrepreneurship. Last semester, he teamed with two other entrepreneurship majors at the University of Dayton to launch UD Sticker Co., which sells sticker decals sporting such slogans as "Student for Four Years, Flyer for Life."

All sophomores in the entrepreneurship program, which has been ranked in the top 20 in the country for seven straight years by The Princeton Review and Entrepreneur magazine, start micro-businesses through the L. William Crotty Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership. Johnson wants to use the entrepreneurial skills he learns in the classroom and the school of hard knocks to become a full-time social entrepreneur.

"When it comes to this business, I want to take the next two-and-a-half years to grow it as much as I can," he said. "I may need to expand the product line eventually."

It's not unusual to spot a futon in a college dorm room. Johnson rigged up a hammock in his room. "People sleep in it all the time. It's a hit," he said.

In the meantime, he's eying the student houses in the neighborhoods surrounding campus: "There are porches all over the place. What a perfect place to hang a hammock."

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