Interview by Howie Rhee.

Our Conversation with Chelsea Koglmeier

Duke I&E: What did you do before Duke and where did you live?
CK: I grew up in Cincinnati, OH and went to a public high school in one of the suburbs. After HS, I took a gap year before heading to Duke and worked for an Americorps program called City Year. Through City Year, I mentored, tutored and ran extra curricular activities in an inner city high school in Philadelphia. Hugely impactful year that opened my eyes to how broken our education system is, introduced me to the challenges of living with very little (you make a “stipend” versus salary in Americorps), and further ignited a desire to work to help people. The phrase “to help people” is generic, but that’s been the driving force for a lot of my decisions.

Duke I&E: What did you focus on at Duke? What were your main activities and areas of study?
CK: I studied public policy, Spanish and documentary studies. I was super interested, and remain interested, in the power of telling individual stories (documentaries) to encourage people to action (pub policy). They’re also all relatively hard skill sets in the spectrum of critical thinking learning that goes on in college. I started seeking harder skill sets as I ticked down the years. I believe that search was me becoming more aware of the insane quantity of resources at my disposal at duke and the mad scurry to arm myself with whatever I could before emerging into the real world. On another note, Spanish is just beautiful. I love speaking it and believe the language works better with my personality than english. Someday, I’ll speak it with frequency again.

Outside of classes, I was super involved with 2 organizations: 1) Duke Engage and 2) Duke Triathlon. My relationship with DukeEngage was incredibly powerful. It’s why I applied to Duke and thus, immediately when I arrived, I went to get involved. They’ll actually tell you the story, but I walked into the office on Day #1 of my freshman year and said “how can I be part of this?”— to them, it was validation the organization was turning into something real and, for me, it resulted in a 4-year stint on the DukeEngage Student Advisory Committee, where I was able to help define the trajectory of the incredibly impactful (and awesome) organization.

My junior and senior year I ran the club Triathlon Team. I’d been a highly competitive athlete in high school (played around with collegiate lacrosse and swimming, but with 2 torn acl’s decided to take the gap year instead) and was missing athletic outlets. I joined the relatively new, club team my sophomore year; quickly immersed into the culture, lifestyle and performance aspects; and took the team over my junior year. We grew the team from 40 to 65+ active members, worked with 2 professional triathlete coaches, solicited corporate sponsorships,
orchestrated over 18 practice options weekly, and I (personally) became an incredibly competitive athlete in the sport. It was more than a full time job, but I loved it.

**Duke I&E:** Tell us about the DukeEngage program that you were involved in Uganda. What did you do and what did you learn?

**CK:** I did an independent DukeEngage project in a refugee community outside Kampala, Uganda after my freshman year. I worked with an existing micro-finance nonprofit that was struggling and joined the community to look into what the challenges were with loan repayment and to build/teach adult literacy classes to the women in the program.

Lots of learning. First of all, I learned how futile my efforts were while in country. I was an impassioned, caring 20-year-old without resources, walking into a community and trying to help. I can tell you that I spent a significant amount of my time sitting on the floor of one of the elders’ house waiting, sitting, listening to people speak Acholi. I also spent a lot of time in the “kitchen”, cooking posho and peas/beans. It was at least a 3 hour process given the state of the stoves, but it validated me to the women I was working with. Honestly, it wasn’t until month 2 that they’d let me cook alone.

When leaving the country, I had over $1K left in my grant money from Duke. I didn’t want to pocket it or pass it out as a handout, so I purchased beautiful, handmade, paper jewelry from every woman in the nonprofit. I donated all the clothes I’d brought with me and packed my suitcases full of beads. I then threw “bead” parties to raise money and awareness for the community — raising $5600 to send back to send children to school.

It was in the follow up that I was able to “help”.

**Duke I&E:** You volunteered at Accion Emprendedora one summer. How did that go? Was it too late to do it?

**CK:** Actually, I helped start AE’s US arm. AE works with hispanic micro-entrepreneurs to provide business education classes and to help them refine existing skill sets to work within the structure of the US. After I studied abroad in Bolivia, I got back and wanted to stay involved with spanish. I found Alejandro and Ignacio, who were applying to Duke Startup Challenge with the idea to bring AE to the states (existing Chilean org that Ignacio had founded). I loved the idea and jumped on board. We won the social track! $5K in the bank.

That summer, I got funding from DukeEngage’s RIPP Fellowship to build organizational capacity and create a human capital stream from Duke to the organization. In many ways, this was a turning point for me, as I realized that I loved to build things, versus solely helping people.

CK: I joined the pilot class of Venture for America after graduating from Duke. Venture for America (VFA) is a program that pairs recent college grads with startups in up-and-coming cities around the country. The organization claims that value creation is analogous to job creation — something I also believe in a purely capitalistic sense — thus, redirecting the flow of talent, bolstering new industries and innovation, and creating jobs, are the goals of VFA.

The reality is we're building a startup mafia in less “frequented” startup cities across the country. It's an insane network of impressive people that I'm humbled to be part of. I joined the organization after being instinctually pulled to the mission and the people, but it's proved to be my best career/personal move yet.

I joined VFA to learn how to “build” things.

I'm now starting The Bikes O.R.O, a Low-Profit Limited Liability Company (L3C) - a company with a double bottom line - to build beautiful bikes and support recycled bike distribution internationally. It's a company idea I thought of while living in Uganda and a sustainable way to “help people.”

Duke I&E: You are interested in business development. Tell us about that.

CK: I've worked across organizational capacities at my previous tech startup (Roadtrippers) and at the tech accelerator I worked in (The Brandery). The majority of my roles have included operations/process/internal growth systems AND business development. The BD has spanned preliminary evangelism, relationship building, story telling, product creation around scaled revenue solutions, and unique “brand” special projects. I love creating the ideas and building the systems, but tend to move on after that point as I'm not the best person to optimize within specific positions — not deeply talented in a singular capacity or interested in a single job.

Duke I&E: Any key pieces of advice to pass on to Duke students?

CK: Look around and find all the things you can take advantage of at Duke. Resources and opportunities are exploding at the seams.

Also, if you don’t currently think learning is the coolest thing ever, take some time off and go back to school in a few years. There’s a lot to learn in the world too and you may return with increased appreciation for how lucky we are to have 4 years of self-growth and learning in a beautiful place.

Duke I&E: Favorite memory of Duke?

CK: Holy hell. What a question. I've had so many flashes of different things I could say, but the one that really resonates is a day at the end of my senior year, sitting in
the gardens with friends, super relaxed. After 4 amazing years with amazing people, I felt supported, absolutely in love with life, and my heart started to beat just a little faster at the thought of what was to come.