

With What We Have

Every call I receive from an unfamiliar 574 number, the area code for North Central Indiana, is a gift of an opportunity to serve. This is because an unfamiliar 574 number means one thing – someone is interested in applying for a loan from JIFFI. JIFFI, an acronym for the Jubilee Initiative for Financial Inclusion, is a student-run community microlender which offers an alternative credit product to payday loans and provides personal financial management services.

Raised in a missionary family, I learned from my parents that service is an important means by which we use our vocation to participate in God's plan for the people we meet in our lives. I witnessed my parents serve in Thailand – my father as a computer engineer and my mother as a preschool teacher – as our family experienced God's grace by giving and receiving from others. The detail they stressed was simple but important: We must serve with what we are given in our present circumstances.

I tried to live by this philosophy whenever I could. In high school, I dedicated considerable time developing my musical talent, so I led the school chamber music club to host a concert and sell our CDs to help an international education organization fund a school in Cambodia. When I began college, I spent time volunteering at the South Bend Center for the Homeless to learn about the extent of poverty in my campus community and about the numerous organizations that were fighting together for the wellbeing of our city. Meanwhile, I pondered what I should make of my interests in business and finance. There were certainly voices doubting how business can really be a force for good, but I was determined to find a way.

I gained a new perspective after freshman year when I travelled to India on a summer service learning program through Notre Dame's Center for Social Concerns. The non-profit I was placed into assigned me a research project on money lending practices in the tribal villages they served. I interviewed many people – farmers, blacksmiths, shopkeepers, tailors, and lenders – to learn about their finances and how a typical loan offered in the area would affect their lives.

That was the spark which set ablaze my interest in financial justice. When I returned to Notre Dame, I learned through books like *Broke, USA* by Gary Rivlin about predatory lending businesses in the United States that preyed on the poor. Payday lending specifically interested me when I learned that South Bend is plagued by these manifestations of predatory lending. There are more than 7,000 active borrowers in our community who collectively hemorrhage \$3.5 million every year on payday fees, trapped by the unforgiving structure of these debt traps. I had to act, especially as a business student, and follow my philosophy of service.

In the middle of sophomore year, I put together a team of 12 students and conducted research on payday lending. We read academic publications by the Center for Responsible Lending, PEW Research Center, and the American Center for Progress. We visited local organizations – such as St. Joseph County Bridges out of Poverty, St. Margaret’s House, Stone Soup Community, and the Monroe Circle Community Center – to better understand the dynamics of poverty and to learn more about the demographics of the payday lending market. We also interviewed a former employee of a payday lender to get an insider perspective.

At the end of my sophomore year, we compiled our research and presented our findings to a panel of professors and community leaders, including the Mayor of South Bend, to gain more feedback on our plans to address payday lending. Together, we shaped the idea for JIFFI as a student-led microlending organization, and I dedicated the summer after my sophomore year to working for another campus microfinance organization in UNC Chapel Hill to gain experience and prepare JIFFI’s operations. Finally, we instated our Board of Directors comprised of faculty members, community leaders, and students in the fall of 2013 and applied for nonprofit status with the help of the Notre Dame Legal Aid Clinic so that we could operate independently of the University and build a culture of professional caliber student leadership.

Since then, we have seen encouraging results. Our 12 member volunteer team grew to 30 last fall after receiving nearly 50 applications from talented and passionate students who wished to join our cause. We issued 8 loans totaling \$2,260, and saved our borrowers an estimated \$4,000 in payday fees. Our borrowers also experienced indirect savings by being able to quickly replace a broken washing machine, clean out bed bugs before moving out of an apartment, fix a broken water heater for the winter, and pursue job training to improve future job prospects. To increase our capacity for 2014, we raised over \$8,500 this winter, and to expand our client base and spread our impact, we formed partnerships with the Penn Township Trustees and La Casa de Amistad, a local community center serving Spanish-speaking residents. Partnering with the South Bend Heritage Foundation by sharing the Foundation’s downtown office also contributed to establishing a local touch point.

With a successful pilot program behind us, we have set internal and external goals to ensure that our organization is a valuable resource to our community. Internally, we hope to normalize leadership transitions within two years with the oversight of the Board to ensure the survival and quality of the JIFFI staff. My job as the president also has been to encourage an atmosphere of creative thinking to help us

find ways become financially sustainable by 2017. Externally, our primary concern is accurately measuring our impact on our clients' lives. This will be a longer process of trial and error as we collect additional data and consider various factors for success. Furthermore, we seek to develop a signature JIFFI event with each of our major partners, such as hosting financial literacy days for children with the Robinson Community Learning Center or placing a JIFFI squad every year on St. Joseph County Homeward Bound 5k Runs.

While our results and goals are encouraging and bold, we recognize that they are miniscule compared to what we are up against – there are over a dozen payday loan stores in South Bend, each serving around 600 customers per year, turning huge profits. Furthermore, as a student organization, we also face the unique challenges of balancing class and work to achieve the scale necessary to make a meaningful impact, while ensuring the sustainability of our organization as students graduate and leave the team each year.

But I am glad that we face these challenges. When I founded JIFFI, I wanted to build an organization that would offer my peers, now and in the future, an opportunity to engage with South Bend on a deeper level than ever before. My intent for JIFFI does not end with providing tools for financial independence; I also wanted to share my philosophy of service by shaping JIFFI as a nexus at which students' interests, passions, and vocations intersect in concrete action to address real problems in the community. Furthermore, while JIFFI has a clear mission with targeted outcomes for the future, I accept the fact that the way we navigate the road to success will change over time through new learning and innovation. That is why I am grateful to witness my peers taking ownership of our mission, and I am confident that when I and the other founding members graduate and take on a more remote and advisory role, the next executive team of JIFFI associates will continue to contribute their talents and find new ways, which I could not, to magnify our impact and mitigate our weaknesses.

Sometimes, I wonder what I will make of the jarring transition into my career after graduation, especially with regard to maintaining a lifestyle of service. I will not be receiving calls from 574 numbers, which are opportunities of service I now cherish. But I take solace in the continuity that I will have – the lesson I hope my peers take away from JIFFI is a lesson I must also constantly learn and practice. I am encouraged because my understanding of service as relating to others with what we have as a fellow human being is really just an attitude, a way to be human. I trust that I will be guided to another story in which my interests and my vocation will play a part in other people's lives.