

Starting a Non-Profit at Medical School

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Dear Editor,

This piece shares the experience of starting a non-profit while in medical school. The process of how to go about starting a non-profit is explained and the specific skills which can be learned from this experience and how they could help a future doctor are mentioned.

While starting a non-profit was something I never planned to do while in medical school, I am happy that I did as I learned so much from it. During the summer of my fourth year (of a six-year undergraduate entry program) while playing tennis, I was shocked to see a tennis coach put thousands of barely-used tennis balls into a garbage bin for disposal. Most tennis players open a new can of balls and discard them after only a few hours of use, as the balls start to lose pressure. However, few are aware of the environmental impact that tennis balls can have, as a single ball can take hundreds of years to decompose. Introducing my idea for a non-profit: Balls 4 Eyeballs, a youth-led movement with the goal of protecting the environment while funding eye research. This was started by my younger brother and I, two lifelong tennis players from Toronto, Ontario, who felt that it was unacceptable for perfectly good balls to be discarded after only a few hours of play, ending up in landfills. My experience with eye research in the U.K., U.S. and Canada, indicated eye research in Canada is relatively underfunded, which I wanted to help change. Balls 4 Eyeballs places collection bins at no charge in tennis clubs in Toronto and around Ontario to collect used balls, which are sold and the proceeds donated to Canadian eye charities.

I chose to register the organization as a not-for-profit federal corporation, for more credibility than being individually run. As well, registered not-for-profit corporations can apply for grants, can raise funds without paying taxes, and donors may be more willing to donate to organizations with non-profit status. Co-founding a non-profit helped me develop numerous skills that will help me succeed in the medical profession. Coordinating a team of volunteers improved my leadership skills; speaking with tennis clubs, and convincing them to accept our collection bins, honed my communication and collaboration skills. I acquired practical business skills in creating a website, incorporating, running social media, budgeting, marketing, fundraising, opening a bank account, record keeping, applying for grants, and responding to queries. While I still have a lot to learn, my experiences have taught me invaluable

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skills that I can apply in my future as a medical professional.

A substantial amount of work is required in starting out, and continuing its operation and growth, so it is best to select something you are passionate about. I also recommend enlisting the support of others who can help, as it is difficult and time-consuming to do things all yourself. You may need professional advice from a lawyer or accountant prior to creating your not-for-profit. Be prepared to spend money on start-up costs like incorporation, legal or accounting fees, etc. You will need to keep good records of expenses and funds collected. Although not-for-profit corporations are not required to pay income tax, you will still need to file paperwork with the government each year such as an income tax return and other paperwork required in the jurisdiction you are incorporated. I recommend that you 'test the water' with your idea initially, not rushing out to setup a non-profit organization, given the time and expense involved. Also, you might not need to file as a non-profit organization if you can instead work with an existing organization, so do your own homework in that respect.

Last summer as our non-profit became more well-known, we went from being featured in local magazines, to national newspapers, radio shows, even on national television for a featured segment. In our first few months of operation, we collected over 50,000 tennis balls, with bins placed in over 30 tennis clubs across Ontario. Overall, I'm very proud of everything our non-profit has accomplished so far, I learned so much as a result, and this is just the beginning!



Figure 1: Photo of Ethan and his brother Cooper Waisberg next to their Balls 4 Eyeballs collection bin at a tennis club. Photo by Ethan Waisberg.



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