

ONE BROWN STUDENT'S AFRICAN ODYSSEY

HOW HARD WORK AND A LOT OF CORN CHIPS ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN MALI

BY JOHN TARABORELLI

While some Brown students' main concerns are making it to class on time or maybe landing a good job after graduation, 23-year-old Caitlin Cohen has more wide-reaching goals: namely the design and implementation of health care programs in the impoverished slums of Bamako, Mali. And she's willing to do whatever it takes to make this happen, including founding the Mali Health Organizing Project (MHOP), a non-profit that facilitates those goals, as well as putting her face on over 25 million bags of Frito-Lay corn chips to raise awareness of her cause. More on that later, but let's start at the beginning.

As a student of International Development at Brown University, the Vermont native wanted to find a way to go beyond the traditional research role in developing the health care infrastructure of West Africa. "I very much believe in researching outcomes," she says, "not research for its own sake. How many times do you have to prove that mosquito nets prevent malaria?"

In 2006, Caitlin and her two partners founded MHOP after witnessing the situation in the slums of Bamako, Mali's capital and largest city. In addition to the basic lack of infrastructure and money, there were more baseline problems that MHOP sought to address. One of was the lack of education typical of poor countries with low literacy rates. Another was the fundamental lack of communication and interaction between the slum residents and their government. Rather than play the part of the western "saviors," riding to the rescue of the people of Mali and then continuing off into the sunset, the volunteers of MHOP wanted to help these folks become leaders in their own communities, to make the

progress sustainable even in the non-profit's absence. The whole organization is founded, as Cohen says, on "the idea that people have the capacity to do this themselves."

MHOP tries to be a liaison between the people and their government, to help citizens who have little understanding of their own rights, let alone the levers of progress and power, interact with these bureaucracies in an effective way. Health and civic education are a big part of that, as is the effort to compel the government to provide basic services. The goal is to foster and support local groups that will spur the government into action rather than replace them. They work closely with women in the slums to train them to be effective parents and heads of household.

Once that foundation is in place, MHOP tries to help these women evolve into community activists and then health care workers. The final stage is for these women to become elected health leaders in their own communities. Now, instead of relying on health programs developed and maintained by outsiders, the people within cities like Bamako can craft their own and administer them with the proper educational foundation necessary to get funding and government support.

The Mali Health Organizing Project has thus far been a resounding success. With Cohen and other leaders in the organization working 80 to 90 hours a week, and shuttling frequently between Mali and the United States in service of their mission, MHOP is growing. "The hardest thing we do is fundraising," Cohen admits. "You'd think it would be building or dealing with the government, but everything

is so new, it's hard to fundraise." Still, she seems up to the challenge.

After raising \$14,000 in their first year, the money has begun to flow a bit more. The group has received funding from the Clinton Global Initiative, the action arm of the former president's charitable foundation, and DoSomething.org, an online organization that encourages teens to get involved in non-profit work. At press time, MHOP was a finalist for a grant from Ashoka, a global organization that supports social entrepreneurs.

The biggest profile-raising accomplishment yet came when the Nickelodeon Teen Choice Awards and Frito-Lay partnered up with MHOP to put Caitlin's face on all the 99-cent bags of Nacho Cheese Doritos sold for a year, an estimated 25 to 100 million bags. This will quite literally put information about MHOP into the hands of millions of Americans.

Going forward, the ideal is to take MHOP's programs national across Mali and establish a working model that can be replicated in other nations facing similar challenges. Within the slums in which the organization is already working, they will continue to train leaders to tackle the everyday struggles of health care in their own communities. Next on the agenda: plans to break ground on a clinic that will service 60,000 residents.

All this would be impressive for anyone, let alone someone who is still a student. Cohen is currently in Mali, but plans to graduate from Brown Medical School in the next few years. For now, if you want to see her, grab a bag of Doritos, or better yet, log onto Mali-Health.org and find out what you can do to help.



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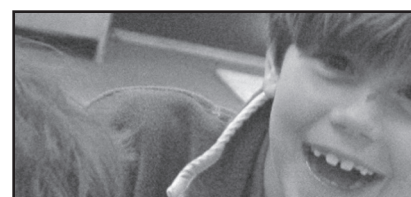
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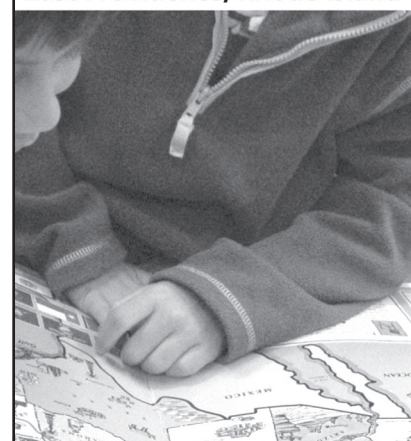
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