

Retracing Steps - An Alumnus? take on revisiting ISEF as a chaperone

Tue, 2012-05-15 22:46 -- Dominic Tremblay

Part I ? It all comes full circle

When I was first called up on stage at my regional fair in Montreal to receive the Intel ISEF Participation Award, all I could think about was "there must be some mistake, it can't be me they called!" That was in 2004. To be honest, I only believed I was going to ISEF when my chaperone gave me my badge and led me into the exhibit hall in Portland, Oregon. At first the opportunity was a shot at the world stage and over \$3 million in prizes and a chance to represent my country. But as the week progressed I learned that Intel ISEF is about much, much more. In a way, I was wearing a Team Canada sweater (I still own all of my gear and wear it as often as I can!) but the will to become a global citizen was imprinted in my mind. I was aiming to showcase my work on the world stage, but at the same time realizing how important it was to spread the word about science fairs in my local community. I was in the running for many prizes, and at the same time being rewarded with something teenagers crave more than money, pizza and Facebook? someone who listened to what you had to say about the world.

My views and reasons for competing to attend Intel ISEF changed after Portland? I now realized that while the prizes I won and recognition I gained were truly amazing, what I was really looking for every year was a chance to spend time with people who cared so much about an issue that they dedicated months of work to it.

One thing that hasn't changed? I still don't believe I'm at ISEF until I walk into the exhibit hall.

I have had the good fortune of representing Team Canada at ISEF on four separate occasions: 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007. My family drove down to Indianapolis in 2007, when I was 17 years old and in what would be the last competitive science fair of my life. After the awards ceremony, I knew I had a good run, and it was time to hang up my skates while they were still sharp. I had all my teammates, my friends, sign the back of my Team Canada sweater. Everyone left a funny, heartfelt message.

But there was something I noticed written there by one of my chaperones, who had seen me grow up at science fairs from the time I was 13. The message wasn't funny, or very emotional either. But it made all the difference.

Don't stop.

I saw those words and I understood at that moment, that my skates weren't going anywhere. That if I had been a good player, now I had to become a good coach. Maybe the Larry Robinson of science fairs! Since 2008, I've stayed deeply involved with science fairs at the regional and national level in Canada. My message and drive is simple: being selected to attend ISEF is a privilege, but having the opportunity and training to compete for that selection is a right. Mentoring students, providing training resources and guides, as well as encouraging alumni participation were part of my daily life even during my undergrad at McGill. It all came back to those words: Don't stop.

The impact we can have on the systems and events that make us who we are is infinite. For a few years, we are finalists, competitors, beneficiaries. But we should aspire to become teachers, providers and benefactors. My chaperones taught me that.

So as you can imagine, when I graduated from McGill in Chemical Engineering, ready to order my LSAT books to start studying for law school, Stefane Filion's (Youth Science Canada ISEF Team Canada Fair Director and ISEF Alumnus) e-mail brought a huge smile to my face:

Kartik, what are you doing this May?

I was busy. I had a million things to finalize and law school applications to start. It was now 2012 and ten years since my very first science project, and I was contemplating letting it all go to start another chapter in my life. But then I sat back and thought about what I had done every May since 2004, and wondered if I could ever really stop helping students excel in their projects and enjoy science fairs. Helping others is not a chapter in life but a running theme. It is not a plot element, but the plot itself.

I feigned ignorance and told Stefane I was free in May? then I immediately canceled everything I had between May 10th and May 19th. It was going to be my first time back at ISEF in five years. But not as a finalist, competitor or beneficiary. But rather a teacher, provider and benefactor.

This will be my first year as a chaperone for Team Canada at ISEF and I am super stoked! We have an extremely strong group this

year and it really has come full circle for me. I am honored and humbled, and very excited!

10 days. 1500+ projects. 800 judges. 68 countries. 3 million dollars. One goal. Infinite memories. Welcome to Intel ISEF 2012 in Pittsburgh.

Yours scientifically,

KSM

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