

Up Close with Irene Fernando

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Irene Fernando, '07 B.S.B., and three other U freshmen had an idea: encourage their fellow students to hop a bus during Spring Break to volunteer across the U.S. That was 2003, and the idea has grown into Students Today Leaders Forever (STLF), a non-profit with chapters on campuses throughout the Midwest. The group's Pay it Forward Tours helped STLF win the 2008 Social Entrepreneurs Cup as Minnesota's top innovator for social change. "Serving with people allows a group to connect on a different level," says Fernando, STLF full-time co-executive director.

What brought you to Minnesota?

The summer before my senior year of high school I participated in a program at the Carlson School to introduce minority students to business education. I thought the U was gorgeous and a really cool place. I decided to attend. I was an L.A. skate girl in a new place. The U was a playground for me. Within the first week I joined a sorority and helped start Students Today Leaders Forever.

Why did you start STLF?

It was a desire for a long-term impact. We asked ourselves, "How will we be remembered on this

was our way of standing apart and making a true difference. We also knew there was a misperception of college kids, and we wanted to combat that stereotype.

Was it easy to get it off the ground?

The first year we had few supporters. There were a lot of people who said, "Are you kidding? You expect people to pay money to give up their spring break to sleep on floors and do service projects?" Looking back, it does seem like an impossible feat. But we've consistently grown, and students want more. So far we've done 81 tours in three-quarters of the U.S.

What about the U made it a good place to start STLF?

The character, quality, and abilities of the people who attend the U set them apart. Plus, the metro is very service oriented. People in my age bracket—I'm 22—grew up when the rise and fall of dot-coms happened, when Enron happened. A lot of entrepreneurial successes and failures occurred during our formative years. It showed us that we can make big changes, and they can be good or bad. The bad stuff we witnessed led to a sense of civic responsibility.

What are some long-term benefits of STLF?

We've been able to engage students in philanthropy at a young age. In addition to their time and talent, students are contributing their money. There are nearly 60 college students giving \$12 monthly for a year. This is good not just for us but for the wider non-profit community. We're introducing young people to philanthropy in a way that we hope