

Michelle Muturi: A Small Project with a Big Future

Every year Pilgrim Place hosts the Annual Napier Initiative Celebration recognizing 12 graduating seniors at the five undergraduate Claremont Colleges for their passion for peace, social justice, and environmental sustainability. The Napier Initiative was established in 2010 by Pilgrim Place Senior Living Community in partnership with the five undergraduate Claremont Colleges.

While Pilgrim Place is actively preparing for the next recognition of the best ideas and young talents, we decided to highlight one of the recently implemented Napier projects. Michelle Muturi's Ecobrick project from 2023 has proven to be a small initiative with a big future.

Growing up in Kenya, Michelle was inspired by her conservationist father and became deeply involved in the "Revive the Green" initiative to combat deforestation. While a junior at Pitzer College, Michelle in the summer of 2022 traveled to South Africa, where she saw how a school groundskeeper creatively reused plastic bottles, sparking her interest in using plastic waste as a sustainable building material. This led her to develop a project aimed at transforming non-biodegradable plastics into durable construction materials to address pollution and social issues in Nairobi. Back at Pitzer College, Michelle demonstrated her remarkable capability in crafting a proposal showing meticulous planning, including care that backup plans were available if necessary. It received a Napier Initiative Award of \$20,000.

Ecobrick Solutions Project began in two primary schools in Kenya, Olosirkon and OleKasasi. Over two to three months, students enthusiastically collected plastic bottles from their environments and filled them with sand to make eco-bricks. This hands-on involvement not only educated them about the significance of recycling but also forged bonds during collaborative bench construction projects. They realized that, although young, they had the power to make the world better. Michelle proudly reported that "together, we celebrated the completion of these projects as a testament to the power of collective effort in recycling and utilizing roughly 6000 plastic bottles per project."

But in some ways, that was just the beginning. As the Ecobrick Solutions Project expanded, it became clear that its impact could extend beyond individual efforts. Recognizing the potential for broader influence, Michelle led the creation of a more sustaining a Community Based organization (CBO). The government pledged funds to support an additional project.

The project received international recognition when it was invited to participate in the first-ever African Youth Climate Assembly. This platform provided an opportunity to exhibit the project's success and engage with officials from the African Union, European Union, United Nations, and the Kenyan government. Their positive response and appreciation for the project's impact highlighted its relevance in the context of global climate action. A segment on the Voice of America provided even greater public recognition.

"The journey from a simple idea to a fully realized project," Michelle reflected, "has been profoundly rewarding. Through Napier's support and the lessons learned from my father's teachings, community engagement, and personal experiences, I have been able to transform my passion for the environment into a tangible force for change. This project has not only reduced plastic waste but also fostered community involvement, provided educational opportunities, and inspired others to see the value in sustainability."

