

“UNF Students In Free Enterprise Achieve Success Overseas?”

By: Max Lesser

The barriers of technology and modernity have been broken in Pananao, Dominican Republic, thanks to the University of North Florida’s Students in Free Enterprise organization. SIFE, Students in Free Enterprise, is a premier club at UNF, promoting community outreach through entrepreneurial projects and programs. The organization traveled to the Dominican Republic to implement their latest project Connect Educate Lead (CEL), developed by UNF Junior, JuanCarlos Villatoro.

“CEL is going to benefit the village by providing a computer classroom to a rural school that has limited access to technology and the internet.” said SIFE President, Billy Gelwicks.

The classroom, a forty-foot shipping container, was retrofitted with solar-powered computers, satellite Internet, printers, copiers, and projectors, all of which served to help promote interactive learning environments for developing youth and a sustainable business module for adults. For the youth in Pananao, the classroom provided them with the competitive advantage of computer literacy that is so desperately needed in high school.

“Once the children go off to high school, they’re expected to have some working knowledge of computers and now they won’t have to catch up,” said Gelwicks, “The container will also be a place for the older people in the village to perform distance learning and have access to unfathomable information.”

The village has no source of income aside from family members oversea, and CEL hopes to provide a launching point for entrepreneurial endeavors. In Pananao, agriculture provides enough food for the village, and through CEL, an outlet to export surplus food and obtain revenue was provided.

“A month ago, they [Pananao citizens] had no internet or connection to the outside world, and experimenting with the pilot program that US schools are undergoing, KHAN Academy, they went from medieval times to modern times instantly,” said Villatoro. “Any village in the world will benefit with Internet connectivity to access modern education.”

The villagers warmly welcomed the students into their homes and culture. “On our last night the entire village held a ceremony at the school to thank us; the children wrote each of us a thank you card and members of the village spoke,” said Brett Weisman SIFE Vice President. “It was a very humbling and rewarding experience, we all left the Dominican Republic without any regrets.”

The project is currently preparing several other containers for travel to the Dominican Republic so that volunteers can implement further education and knowledge to those less fortunate.