

# Global Online *Innovathon*

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**PORTLAND, OREGON, U.S.A. & KHARKIV, UKRAINE**

## Overview

At the end of May, the Global Youth Entrepreneurs (GYE), a Portland-based student-led non-profit promoting international youth entrepreneurship and exchange, held its inaugural Global Online *Innovathon*. The event brought together, over Zoom and Slack, more than seventy high school students from across the United States and Ukraine for intensive intercultural learning and cooperation on pressing social issues created or exposed by the coronavirus pandemic. The participants were split approximately evenly between the two countries, and they represented a range of cultural backgrounds and public and private schools in cities in six U.S. states and fourteen Ukrainian regions.

## What is Global Youth Entrepreneurs?

The program was led by organizers Jackson George (Catlin Gabel School '22), Li Lambert (University of Chicago '24), Britton Masback (Princeton University '24), Solomon Olshin (Pomona College '23), Diana Sobolieva (Miss Hall's School '21) and Seth Talyansky (Stanford University '23) (alphabetically). Sponsorship came from Portland-based nonprofits United Way and Youth Educating Police.

## BOOTCAMP: Keynote Speakers and Group Activities

In preparation for the main weekend of the *Innovathon*, a "BOOTCAMP" program connected the students across many time zones on Sunday, May 24, to introduce them to one another and to the format of the program. Participants were also directed to explore which issues they hoped to tackle, and how. Former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor and Director of the Klitschko Foundation Alina Nosenko joined as distinguished guests, speaking to participants about the importance of collaboration between youth in the U.S. and Ukraine today, and the power of entrepreneurship as a vehicle for self-actualization. After a healthy session of questions from rapt listeners, the bootcamp continued with icebreakers and public speaking exercises. The day's activities drew to a close with an engaging panel session featuring two accomplished young entrepreneurs—Artem Laptiev of Kharkiv, Ukraine, founder of education startup Mavka and incoming freshman at MIT, and Chander Payne of Washington, D.C., founder of community gardening initiative Urban Beet. Students signed off eager to begin work with their teams the following weekend.

## Dates and Goals

The main weekend of the *Innovathon*, from May 29 to 31 (or May 30 to June 1, depending on location), featured GYE's trademark focus on facilitating participant self-exploration, mentor-led instruction and fast-paced teamwork. The new online-only format also brought a new set of challenges and unique opportunities for collaboration. From the weekend kickoff until the final pitches, the *Innovathon* offered opportunities to learn key entrepreneurial skills from expert mentors, network with a diverse collection of youth, and build innovative ventures with intrinsic social benefit.

### **Friday Night / Saturday Morning Ideation & Practice**

The weekend program started late Friday night for American participants and Saturday morning for Ukrainian participants with a collection of icebreaker and team building exercises, where participants were able to discuss interests and receive feedback on their early pitch ideas. Afterward, organizers led the group through an intensive but dynamic pitching exercise, introducing attendees to the GYE pitching formula and getting participants excited to present in front of their peers.

### **International Team Formation**

Next, GYE created a breakout room for each new "company," and officially launched the pitching process in each of these smaller rooms. Aided by survey responses, the organizers chose teams intentionally so as to mix backgrounds and skills while still placing participants in a group with a shared sector interest such as environment or technology. In the hopes of encouraging team independence and decision making, pitches were left largely unstructured. Each member was given the opportunity of an initial 90 second pitch, but the deliberation and voting period afterward was left largely up to the team.

### **48-hour Nonstop Work Time with Mentors, Workshops**

While their American counterparts headed off for a few hours of much deserved sleep, Ukrainian students began project work immediately. Teams had access to continuous mentorship from leaders in business, education, and policy from both the U.S. and Ukraine. These volunteers were a crucial part of the *Innovathon* and met with teams to push their ideas and plans. Chosen for their diverse professional backgrounds, mentors were able to help teams construct a social media and marketing plan, develop a sound business proposal, design complex logos and applications, and more. The rest of the day for Ukrainians and the first full day for Americans was devoted to creating a minimum viable product (MVP), essentially the simplest form of a website, app, or module representing the key features of the company. As the MVP was developed, teams validated this in-progress model with potential customers, updating it in response to feedback received. Students also participated in four expert-led workshops to learn new skills such as customer validation and marketing.

### **Sunday Night / Monday Morning Pitching and Prizes**

The *Innovathon* concluded with team pitches to a panel of judges. GYE's slate of volunteer judges included two organizers, Britton Masback and Diana Sobolieva, alongside special guests Kateryna Bilotil, Second Secretary of the Public Diplomacy Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, and Tim DuRoche, Director of Programs at WorldOregon (the World Affairs Council of Oregon). This year's *Innovathon* followed a special pitching format maximizing personal interaction with judges as well as the opportunity for teams to showcase their work to the larger participant body. Each team was given up to eight minutes for their slides presentation during a one-on-one session with judges,

followed by seven minutes of judge Q&A. Afterward, teams gave shorter informal presentations of their work in an all-group Zoom call. Finally, the *Innovathon* closed with the announcement of prizes, a group reflection on current events in the US and Ukraine, and a mini-presentation about carrying the event momentum forward.

### **Prize Recipients**

After an extremely difficult deliberation session, judges awarded the Youth Bringing Immigrants Together (YBIT) team the grand prize. YBIT is a nonprofit organization working to connect young immigrants with mentors and support services through an easy-to-use application and website platform. YBIT builds on the capacity of existing community organizations to make the integration landscape even easier for immigrants to navigate and the team plans to start releasing their program to users in the United States and the Ukraine later this year. The second place award was presented to VOLO, a for-profit application software that centralizes volunteer and intern opportunities for students through an easy-to-use interface and targeted opportunity portfolio.

Winning teams each received individualized prizes to support their growth as companies. The first place team received \$1,000 in seed funding and will meet with top executives and founders at companies such as Nike, Apple, and Microsoft. Runner-up VOLO received a one-year mentorship prize that will support them with long-term guidance consistent with their needs and interests.

### **Most Valuable Participant Prize**

Two students—one American and one Ukrainian—were chosen as “MVPs.” These students embodied the ethos of the event and were key to the success of their teams through their enthusiasm, poise and dedication. Yurii Stasiuk (junior from Kalush) and Gabriella Best (sophomore from Seattle) received this recognition, a letter of appreciation from GYE, and a \$50 prize.

### **GYE Global Online *Innovathon* Impact**

The inaugural Global Online *Innovathon* proved that students do not need to count on months-long academic exchanges or school-run pen pal programs to forge meaningful connections with peers overseas. This model, if replicated for students in more cities and countries, can democratize cultural exchange and remove barriers to partnerships between youth across borders. The choice of the U.S. and Ukraine as the two sides in this event was particularly apt. In the wake of recent affairs in American domestic politics that have cast a shadow over Ukraine–U.S. relations, it is more critical than ever to strengthen ties between young people in our two countries in our common quest for freedom and prosperity. Given the enthusiasm and solicitude that marked all the interactions of participants, the abundant relationships formed this weekend are sure to last for much time to come. Three Portland students will further be recruited to take part in GYE’s Trustees of Tomorrow program, a two-way, youth-led and youth-oriented hybrid virtual and physical exchange with three already determined Ukrainian counterparts from the weekend. The *Innovathon* has thus helped pave the way for a day that Ukrainians and Americans will no longer see each other first as foreigners, but as friends.

### **Additional resources**

GYE is compiling footage from the program and will post it in the coming days to [www.globalyouthentrepreneurs.net/goi](http://www.globalyouthentrepreneurs.net/goi). To learn more about GYE's Trustees of Tomorrow, please see [www.globalyouthentrepreneurs.net/portland-ukraine-trustees-of-tomorrow](http://www.globalyouthentrepreneurs.net/portland-ukraine-trustees-of-tomorrow).