In November 2015, the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility and the Center for Innovation & Leadership brought YCenter to campus to host a social innovation hackathon called, "Impactathon." Having already conducted community assessments in Mozambique, YCenter brought country briefs, insider knowledge, and local community challenges in need of solutions. During the Impactathon, participants learned about these challenges as well as Human Centered Design (HCD) in order to devise socially innovative solutions to real life problems.

Swatties Wendy Wu '19 and Julius Miller '19 won the Impactathon with their proposal for CoCoPod as a possible answer to the problem of vaccination storage and transportation in Inhambane, Mozambique. There residents experience power outages frequently causing vaccines stored in cold boxes to spoil. Vaccine supply shortages, a lack of trained health workers, unreliable transportation systems and storage facilities, are all public health issues residents in Mozambique face. "Growing up I always had access to vaccines. The doctor’s office is only 5 minutes away. I never experienced a power outage. For me, it was simple to get a vaccine. So I thought this situation as truly tragic."

Using HCD, Miller and Wu came up with a brand new solution to this crisis. Their idea is a new type of vaccine transportation system, using a fan, car parts, and fatty acids from vegetable/animal oils. At certain cold states, fatty acids can give a certain cold vapor. The vaccine will be held in coconut husk for a layer of protection and to keep it cool during the trek between cities and villages. The coconut husk is fibrous, so the cold vapor from the fatty acid gases can rise up and keep the vaccine cool.

Miller and Wu pitched their solution, “CoCo Pod,” to a panel of judges on the final day of the impactathon. Judges included Lang Visiting Professor for Issues of Social Change, Denise Crossan; Economics professor and director of Impact Investing at Haverford College, Shannon Mudd; Dhairya Pujara, Founder of YCenter (dhairya@y-center.org); Jennifer Magee, Lang Center; Katie Clark, Center for Innovation and Leadership;
software developer associated with YCenter Jedidiah Weller; and product developer associated with YCenter, Maia Ottenstein. In the end, the pair won paid internships from the Lang Center so that they might test and implement their solution with the support of the YCenter in Mozambique this summer. Realizing they will have to modify their idea, in preparation for the internship, they are both doing research on the local context and diseases in the area. Miller is even learning Portuguese in DualLingo and plans to take a Social Entrepreneurship class at Swarthmore College with Lang Visiting Professor for Issues of Social Change, Denise Crossan, next semester.

“I always thought problem-solving was black and white. This whole design thinking exercise that we did that weekend made me realize that problems are much more nuanced and there are more facets and variables you have to deal with,” Miller said. He continues, “The process was frustrating and challenging but it was also deeply rewarding. It changed my way of thinking for the rest of my life. Now when I see a problem, I use Will design thinking to get the root of the problem.”

"I came to Impact-a-thon with no idea of what's about to happen...” says Wu. She continues, "The experience was quite intense for a beginner like me--developing a mature idea and a feasible plan for such worldwide problem in less than 48 hours? You bet. But at the end, it was all worth it. Impact-a-thon opened my eyes to things I had never even dreamed of. It changed my whole mental attitude towards social challenges in developing countries. I really look forward to implement our idea at Mozambique in the summer of 2016."

Meet Wendy & Julius
On November 9, 2015, 1,000 millennials marched for justice on climate change, race and immigration in Washington DC. The “Our Generation, Our Choice” protest, a collaboration among the 350. Org movement, United We Dream, and the Racial Millions movement aimed to speak to 2016 presidential candidates. Of the experience, Taylor Morgan ’19 (pictured here) writes, “Even if we were all there for separate issues, we were all there for one purpose. It was really powerful to be in that space everyone come together and make it public that these issues all connect with each other and are important.”

Others forged connections with the curriculum through this experience. For instance, Stephen O’Hanlon ’16 reflects, “The march helped further my thinking about social movements and working across coalition groups which is helping me think more about my SOCI thesis. I also gained helpful experience and connections with others in the climate movement.” Mindy Cheng ’18 describes, “The march was great for putting discussions [of] my classes into practice. We talked about social movements in Introduction to Race with Prof. Johnson, [as well as] Urban Education and Education Policy with Prof. Mayorga.” She adds, “Swarthmore students are criticized for only talking about justice in the classroom, and not putting any theories into ‘real’ activist work. However, this is proof that Swarthmore students can and do organize for causes they believe in; I just wish this would happen more often.”
Building Relationships: The Work of Sustainable Serenity Grows

This year marks the 4th year of the Sustainable Serenity, a collaborative effort between Swarthmore students, faculty, and staff of the Serenity House in North Philadelphia. Serenity House is a community resource center that operates there, promoting healing and love in the community. In summer 2014, members of the Swarthmore College community and Serenity House (http://archstreetumc.org/what-we-do/ministry/serenity-house/) built a community garden, which later led to interest in solar panels and the creation of a new venture called Serenity Soular. This venture aims to create a solar cooperative for solar panel installation and weatherization of homes in North Philadelphia.

Professor Giovanna Di Chiro, who course “Sustainable Community Action” forged linkages with Serenity House and is helping to create a community-run cooperative business at Mt. Holyoke, has been engaged in this partnership since the beginning and continues to provide her expertise in the project. Prof. Di Chiro describes, “Drawing on our different backgrounds, knowledges, and experiences, the participants in the Sustainable Serenity team are jointly creating and moving towards a vision of a just transition away from fossil fuels and toward healthy, thriving, and sustainable communities in North Philadelphia rooted in the idea of “just sustainability”: the notion that a truly sustainable society is one in which all peoples are treated with dignity and have access to a healthy environment and a secure livelihood.” The team (pictured here) presented their work, “The Sustainable Serenity Collaborative: Co-producing a “Just Transition” in North Philadelphia,” at the Colloquium on Public Scholarship, Community Engagement Practice, and Sustainability sponsored by The Pennsylvania State University and PA Campus Compact at The Penn State Center on October 30-31 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Lekey Leidecker ‘16, one of the founding members of Sustainable Serenity describes what she has learned on this journey so far: “I’ve learned that small-scale community organizing and relationship building -- which has always been at the center of it for me -- takes on a life of its own. It takes a lot of hard work and sometimes people don’t remember that.” In the beginning, Lekey says, “We didn’t have a set out plan. It evolved organically out of us talking to each other, about ‘What do we have that you need, what do you have that we need’. It came [from] those relationships that we were building [as a result] of those conversations.”
Serenity Soular is on their second year of funding from the Project Pericles Fund of Swarthmore College. Currently, the group has a crowd-funding campaign, whose funds will go to the upcoming apprentice project. Looking to solarize the Serenity House building, this project will allow North Philadelphia residents to work on installing solar panels, do job shadowing, and engage training with a solar installation business. With the target of $10,000, the group is presently only $1500 shy of this fund raising goal. Lekey reflects, “The longer I do it, the more I learn, the more connections I see to all different types of creative things that are going in the world, creative solutions to what seems like extremely daunting problems.”