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85

STUDENTS AWARDED
MONEY THROUGH
THE 125 FUND IN 2022

1:1

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AN AMBITION TO EMPOWER

The 125 Fund gives Westminster students the unique opportunity to upskill, or develop a project or business alongside their studies. Now in its seventh year, the Fund continues to make a global, social impact. Few projects are more worthy of the award than Life Academy, the Colombia-based NGO founded by María del Pilar Aristizábal Pineda (Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Enterprise Development MSc, 2021).

In a sense, María's passion for helping others is in her DNA.

"My family has been, without doubt, my biggest influence," she says. "My dad raised me with his example of generosity and service to others – especially if they are in need. My mother has an unbeatable willpower, that – mixed with patience, makes her the most perseverant person I have ever known."

Both her parents are also both high school teachers, which may explain something about María's chosen career path. She has worked with younger people since she was 15 – a work and a cause, she says she was always "in love with".

And then, one day, everything changed – a close friend of María's died by suicide. The experience shook her to the core, and ultimately changed the course of her life.

"I felt vulnerable and I was not going able to go through that again," she says. "I have had other friends who have tried to commit suicide before and who have had suicidal thoughts. I couldn't do this again, so I decided to create something to tackle the problem – a platform for young people to empower themselves."



From María's conviction came the birth of Life Academy in 2019 – a social enterprise dedicated to tackling what has become a global epidemic of youth suicide. Suicide is the world's second highest cause of death among 15 to 29-year-olds, yet despite the scale of the problem, many people really don't understand it, María tells me.

"There is this misconception that the only people who are at risk have mental health issues," she says. "That is so not true. Of course – they are part of it, but that's not the whole of it. Everyone is susceptible."

There are many factors which can make young people consider suicide, from the stress of studying and its accompanying financial worries, to relationship "heartbreak".

"We look for our own meaning in other people's eyes," María says. "What is so confusing for young people is to understand they have everything they require in themselves."

A huge part of the problem, in María's eyes, is the unique position young people suddenly find themselves in.

"When you're a child you have all this care and when you're an adult you have all these opportunities," she says. "As a youth you're in limbo – none of the benefits of being a child and none of the benefits of being an adult."

To tackle this problem, Life Academy arranges for professionals to deliver soft skills workshops and mentoring for 12 to 18-year-olds.

"We match up employees with student environments," María explains. "They both commit – that not only helps the child, it helps the adult."

Life Academy has previously assisted the school with the highest suicide in rate Manizales, delivering an intervention programme for the eighth

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PART OF THE REASON MARÍA CHOSE WESTMINSTER WAS ITS DIVERSITY AND INTERNATIONAL FOCUS.



María's workshops are increasing emotional well-being among 12 to 18-year olds

grade – the year group reporting the highest levels of suicidal thoughts. Following the programme, in a dramatic turnaround, this year group suddenly reported greater emotional well-being than the rest of the school.

Life Academy is supported by the University of Colombia – which has helped the enterprise build its methodology and measure its results. In 2019, Life Academy was selected by the Colombia's Presidential Council for Youth – a leading national initiatives with a powerful global reach. Achieving this recognition and support from both organizations were real "wow moments", María tells me.

A year later, as María was moving to London to begin her MSc at Westminster, she was awarded The 125 Fund award.

"It was amazing – it came at a very critical point," María says of the Award.

The 125 Fund, launched in 2016, offers Westminster students up to £1,500 to fund personal or professional development. In 2021, María was one of 65 students to receive a share of the nearly £65,000, generously funded by Westminster alumni via the annual telephone campaign.

With its help, Life Academy has launched its services to students in Mexico, China and elsewhere. It has even helped the NGO bring its

personal development workshops to Westminster students.

There have been many challenges connected to going international – not least the language barrier.

"We are a social business founded in Latin America – we speak Spanish. Only 30 per cent of the people in our team spoke English by that time, so it was a huge challenge to translate all our content," María says.

A deeper challenge was learning to understand all these new student cultures – "What they want, how they feel, who they trust" – and finding new solutions which work for students all over the world.

Technology and licenses were also a huge barrier, and The 125 Fund provided game-changing help in this area. As well as significantly developing the enterprise's digital capabilities, the Fund also provided a huge boost to Life Academy's human resources.

Part of the reason María chose Westminster was its diversity and international focus – factors which helped her take Life Academy to the next level. During her time on the MSc, she was also selected for the Young Leaders of the Americas Initiative (YLA), which matches budding social and business entrepreneurs from Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada, with US businesses.

Balancing a Masters course with building an international NGO could be intense at times, María acknowledges.

"It was chaotic – not easy at all," she says. "I think it was the first time when I decided not to even try to be a "perfect" student."

The experience forced her to delegate more and put her trust in colleagues at Life Academy – who have not let her down. At the same time, working on Life Academy helped to give her perspective, while she was studying.

"Working on Life Academy was a medicine," she says. "It was my way to maintain the feeling that we were doing something bigger than ourselves."

Since completing her MSc last year, María's primary focus has been bringing Life Academy to more and more people.

"We expect to be the global platform to empower young people – that's what we dream of," she says. "Our initial focus is Latin America, but we're going to build something that is truly international."

SUPPORT PROJECTS LIKE THESE

The Quintin Hogg Trust (QHT) has generously matched every donation made to The 125 Fund, pound for pound, since 2016. Encouraged by ongoing support from our alumni and friends, the QHT have chosen to extend this matched funding offer until 2023. With your support, we can ensure our students are equipped with the life skills and professional experience they need, to continue to make a positive social impact around the globe.

To find out how you can support The 125 Fund, visit: donate.westminster.ac.uk/donate/the-125-fund

