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How to fund the awesome things in life

By Louise Elliott, CBC News Posted: Dec 25, 2012 8:17 AM ET | Last Updated: Dec 21, 2012 3:48 PM ET



Christopher Smeenk stands with his Awesome Foundation-supported musical plasma project. The PhD student was given \$1,000 to work on the project by a group of Ottawa benefactors who are part of a social giving movement. (Awesome Ottawa)

Edward Ocampo-Gooding is used to innovation.

He works for Shopify, a Canadian startup success story with a futuristic workspace in downtown Ottawa. The tour of his office reveals lots of recreational space for reading, playing pinball or even having a beer.

"We had a graffiti artist come in from Montreal to do all the walls, and some of the murals are done by other Canadian artists," he says, showing off the recreation area that includes a stocked beer fridge, pinball machines and video games.

"There's a coffee bar, oh, and this is kind of cool — every quarter we shut down the company for a couple of days and everyone works on personal projects."

It's not surprising Ocampo-Gooding was drawn to become a fellow of the Awesome Foundation.

The foundation, according to its Web site, is dedicated to "forwarding the interest of awesomeness in the universe."

"I think it's the potential to have an effect on my local community while also supporting bizarre acts of whimsy that wouldn't happen otherwise," he says in explaining his attraction to the idea.

Every month, Ocampo-Gooding and nine others in Ottawa pledge \$100 of their own money.

Then, they get together and cut a \$1,000 cheque for a project they like.

"If you build a giant tricycle that shoots fire, that sounds awesome ... and was

'Sometimes people are like, 'I would like to give the money back, the project didn't work out.' We say, 'No, it's yours. Figure out something great to do with it.'

—Awesome Ottawa's Edward Ocampo-Gooding

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actually a proposal in Portland," he says, rhyming off some of his recent favourites.

"If you write us saying you want to build animatronic giant teddy bears to put in daycares, that sounds awesome. If you want to host ginormous murder mystery party with hundreds of participants with pieces written for each one, we want to (help you) do that."

No strings attached

The Awesome Foundation was born in Boston in 2009, when a group of high-tech workers decided to donate their own money with no strings attached.

It's since grown into a global movement with more than 50 chapters worldwide, 14 of them in Canadian towns and cities.

Unlike a charity, there are no conditions, something even the recipients find a little weird.

"We really do mean no strings," says Ocampo-Gooding.

"Sometimes people are like, 'I would like to give the money back, the project didn't work out.' We say 'No, it's yours. Figure out something great to do with it.'"

Christopher Smeenck works at the Joint Attosecond Science Lab in Ottawa.

It's run by the National Research Council and the University of Ottawa as a place to study, among other things, the impact of lasers on atoms and molecules.

Thanks to an Awesome grant, the PhD student in physics has been spending his evenings and weekends here too, coaching a laser beam to play music.

A musical spark: awesome

He explains how the laser beam passes through two mirrors, creating enough energy to destroy air molecules and create something called plasma, which then generates sound and light.

"There's a curved mirror here," he says, pointing at a tiny mirror on a long table. "This will focus the beam down and create a very high-intensity region at the centre of the focus. Atoms and molecules in the air are ripped apart. When that happens it produces a sound you can hear."

A small spark like a star appears in the air beside one of the mirrors and sure enough, a high-pitched buzzing sound can be heard. At the same time, to the right of the star a mesmerizing red and orange image appears on a white screen.

This is what Smeenck set out to do — to make the music from the laser visible. He has also programmed a laptop computer to "play" the laser. He switches it on and a tinny version of "Amazing Grace" emanates from the plasma star.

It can be hard to find support for this kind of esoteric research. But Smeenck hopes the Awesome Foundation grant will help jumpstart interest in future experiments.

"As a source of funding it's important. It's leverage so I can go to some other people and say, hey it's a project that already has funding."

Organic farming and dance parties: also awesome

Valerie Stam is also a fellow of the Awesome Ottawa chapter.

She rhymes off some of her favourite projects so far: an organic gardening program that allows seniors to grow their own food, a project that gives Karen refugees from Burma a chance to farm the land near Ottawa, and one of her favourites, a lunchtime dance



People take part in a 'Dance dance office revolution' on Sparks Street in Ottawa last summer, a project funded by an Awesome Ottawa grant. (Awesome Ottawa)




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party on the street in downtown Ottawa this August.

"On one level I think it's just getting us out of ordinary everyday experience," she said. "Dance dance office revolution ... that was an experience that takes people out of ordinary office day jobs and allows them to have something special."

The dance party was a huge success — in a city that's not known for getting down.

Unlike with traditional charities, the appeal of the Awesome Foundation is the knowledge that every dollar goes to the person with the idea.

Stam works in the non-profit sector and says she feels empowered when she has a say.

"I give to charity regularly anyway. But here I get more say in where my money goes. It's a way of giving money to projects that are worthy, but can't fit the not-for-profit mould."

In other words, it's not just cutting a cheque — it's committing the time to deciding who is awesome enough to deserve the money.


It's a different form of giving Stam hopes will catch on.

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