When J. Branson Skinner, a student at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study, went to NYU Accra for a semester abroad in Ghana, little did he know that his life would take a huge turn into fair trade and sustainability.

Co-founder, Of Rags and The OR
Gallatin School of Individualized Study, Class of 2012
From: Maryland, US

An Idea Is Formulated
At NYU Accra, Branson started taking some classes that fit well with his academic concentration on the globalization of public health and societies. As a passionate volunteer who had done some traveling, Branson noticed that everywhere he visited had a profound similarity. In an interview with The Ram Online, he described a recurring problem, saying, “One of the things I have always seen has been that it is not so much foreign assistance or somebody coming in and giving things away that helps people. It really is about jobs. It’s great to have food given to you, but it’s better to go and buy it yourself.”

So how do you empower a community?

Of Rags
In an impressively short amount of time (two months), Branson started a business venture called Of Rags, employing Ghanaians and returning a full 40 percent of the proceeds to various causes. Branson worked with local designers, tailors, and seamstresses to create one-of-a-kind textile prints for unique T-shirts featuring a global design. The clothing was both stylish and socially responsible. Not only did Branson sell the product, but he also brought a new awareness to the fashion world, provoking questions such as “who made these clothes, why did the designers choose to produce their clothing line in that particular town, and how are their products helping the people involved?”

The Idea Grows
Of Rags created momentum in sustainable fashion—and then Branson moved forward once again. He closed the business and partnered with Liz Ricketts in a new educational venture called The OR. The two designed Collectofus, a peer education platform and exchange; These Things Take Time, a customizable curriculum; and the Afutu Project, a student-run entrepreneurial venture that puts education programs into action.

Branson says, “We provide a global perspective to local values, place everyday objects in historical context, and present students with a hands-on challenge to address major issues related to consumption cycles. These ideas helped us develop a modern course of study that is housed across our web platforms and carried out in hands-on ways by students connected in classrooms around the world.”

The Afutu Project
The name “Afutu” translates to “mixed” or “mix-matched”—and the project enables grade-school students to collaborate. This collaborative workshop is currently in motion between the University of Cincinnati, students at a nearby public school, and another class in Washington, DC. One class is working to trace their T-shirts back to the invention of the cotton gin, while another turns the T-shirts into backpacks.

The students are partnered with peers in Ghana, who work on a project of their own with the program, ending in the exchange of an object for the backpacks. A brand-new version of the custom-built, online platform, called These Things Take Time, will soon be launched at collectofus.org, enabling teachers to tailor activities specifically for their classrooms through a customizable and interactive website.

Perhaps the most important piece of sustainability, Branson says, is to “educate those who are behind the products.”