TechNews

TEDxIIT - dreams, ideas, revolutions

By Utsav Gandhi CAMPUS EDITOR

Ideas are everywhere. And it's important that these ideas are provided an opportunity to present themselves at a respectable forum, because ideas have the power to transform lives. This past Saturday, a select group of talented IIT staff and alumni shared some phenomenal ideas at TEDxIIT, an independently organized TED event, at the Downtown Campus' Richard Ogilvie Auditorium. With the overarching theme of "breakthroughs," the daylong event was split into three segments – "Breakthroughs in creative education," "About to break through" and "Break through the old ways." These were interspersed with lunch and coffee breaks so that the audience had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss their opinions with the speakers. The event featured nine live talks and four recorded TED talks, with two really creative advertisements (Dulux Paint's "Let's color" and Nokia N8 Cellscope Technology's "Dot - The world's smallest stop-motion animation character").

The event started with a very spirited and enthusiastic live talk by consultant, educator and producer, Tom Tresser, titled "The creativity imperative – why creativity is job #1 for America." He spoke about how America is a work in progress, and creativity is a promise to its natives, immigrants, and the rest of the world. There are 43 million people living in the US right now who were born abroad, and for whom America spells opportunity. An IBM survey found out that 64% of CEOs want their managers to master creativity. The next talk, by Arthur DeVito, Distinguished Professor of Mathematics at the Harold Washington College in Chicago, asked five big questions on how to "fix American education" – what about those students who do not succeed, how American curriculum should be determined, how American education should be funded, how the curriculum should be delivered and how the students

should be assessed. The next one, a recorded talk by Dave Eggers, "Once upon a school initiative," detailing his efforts to create a tutoring center in the Bay Area, CA, was a remarkably simple story delivered in the most interesting, absorbing and gripping manner; and the highlight was the difference it made in the community around the center. It reaffirmed the often overlooked belief in the power of a small idea to transform a community in a big way, simply through conviction and confidence. A highly recommended video to check out on TED.com! Finally, the last talk in this segment was by a recent double graduate in ECE, Jeff Chiles, who, as part of Camras Student

Executive Board, led the initial development of the Intuitive Models in Engineering Education program, currently deployed in Chicago Public Schools. His talk proved that engineering is a great way to make a difference in the lives of others, as well as the fact that engineering is not too professional a field to be taught so "early." An engineering graduate has the mindset, the methodology, the intuition, the curiosity and the will power to apply scientific principles to real-world problems. The challenge is to provide this practical workspace, because handing a kid a manual about laser tag and telling him that it's as good as the real thing is unhelpful.

The next segment, "About to break through," discussed cutting-edge ideas and started off with a talk by Mark Jones, head of service design at IDEO Chicago, stressing the fact that great design also requires tremendous optimism. He highlighted the trend of moving from data mining to pattern recognition (Amazon's "Recommended products for you!") to personalization (telling your airline which seat and meal you'd prefer) to open

platforms, from the '80s to 2010, which clearly shows an increase in customer engagement. The next one, a recorded talk by Dean Kamen, creator of the product that eventually became known as the Segway PT, an electric self-balancing human transporter, was an incredible example of advances in medical technology helping people overcome life's misfortunes. The next one was by Marshall Brown, an assistant professor at the Architecture Department at IIT, talking about the "New Country" – a study about Washington Park as a model for future American cities, where vacant land is also viewed as opportunity. Ending with a talk on the convergence of biotechnology and nuclear science was the duo of Adam Flynn and Jeff







Kantarek, founders of ForeLight, a collaboration that strongly believes in collective ability to innovate and devise new paths.

The final segment, "Break through the old ways" was all about revolutionary thought and the courage to translate it into a desire to create a better world. It started off with a recorded talk by behavioral economist Dan Ariely, who studies the "bugs in our moral code" and examines the hidden reasons we think it's OK to cheat or steal. Studies help make his point that we're predictably irrational and can be influenced in ways we can't grasp. Visit TED.com for this fascinating insight into the human mind. The next speaker was Dr. Laura Hosman (featured last semester as a "person you should know" in TechNews), who presented a case for greater technology for development ("a difficult, complicated and messy process with no shortcuts and no quick fixes"). Having worked recently in Haiti with the One Laptop per Child project she made a strong appeal to everyone to not abandon such projects due to roadblocks of any nature. This was followed by a shorter TED talk titled "How to

start a movement" which analyzes a three-minute video of a random dance party on a hillside that kept gaining momentum – and it was fascinating to see the lessons this simple examination of the human mind provides.

The segment ended with Mike Hettwer, a freelance photographer of paleontological and archeological expeditions who works on independent (and hence privately-funded) assignments for the National Geographic and many other magazines, journals and periodicals. His travels have taken him to 70 countries and over 300 cities (though he still says Chicago is THE place) - Angkor Wat, Cambodia; Easter Island; Bangla-

> Mt. Everest; the Gobi and Sahara Deserts; Darwin, Australia, and many, many more. The lessons he learned include being inspired and dreaming big, working hard and taking risks, embracing the possibility of surprise for a great story, getting some research done before an assignment, and finally, giving something back to our planet. A little side note – he graduated more than twenty years ago from IIT as an Electrical Engineer and worked on building several web consulting companies for a long time before he was financially secure enough to sell his company, pack his bags, and set off on a journey to realize his dreams.

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= independently organized TED event

(Photos by Matt Renfree and Amy Lee Segami)

