The Challenge

My name is Ashley Birkeland and I am a senior in high school attending Riverpoint Academy. I am in an entrepreneur class called Trep Studio where we are encouraged to create a product or service that is beneficial to the environment, or people who are in need of something. For the last few months, my group EcoWear has been working on a product that will help with children with the Cochlear Implant.

In the beginning of our project, we knew we wanted to do something having to do with fashion. We all had a great interest in the fashion industry, so we thought this topic would be perfect for us. At first, we wanted to create a sustainable fashion line made out of discarded fabrics and other materials. Shortly after making this decision, we went out to the community to a little store called Fringe and Fray. Fringe and Fray is a second hand store located in downtown Spokane. We mostly went there for inspiration and see if there was anything they could donate to us to use for our project. They didn’t donate anything to use and we didn’t feel inspired. That day, we also went to a little boutique called Finders Keepers. Finders Keepers is a dress shop located in downtown Spokane. We went inside to look around and take pictures of the dresses and to also help us get inspired. We also tried on some hats.

A week later, we went to a store called Blue Button. Blue Button is a t-shirt printing shop. Blue Button is different from other printing shops because they use organic cotton shirts and they use water-based ink to print their shirts with. They also hire people who immigrated from Mexico or South America. We got some great information about the shop and they gave us a tour around their printing area. Again, we where having a hard time getting inspired and we didn’t really have any ideas on what we where going to do.

After much deliberation with the group, we decided that we where going nowhere with his topic. We needed a fresh start so we decided to put our heads together and try to think of something different to do. One of our group members mentioned designing products for kids. We really liked that idea, so we decided to think of something more specific. I mentioned creating something for the kids who go to the Guild School. The Spokane Guild School is a non-profit organization that helps kids with disabilities and helps the family with everyday tasks and needs. They have speech therapists and physical therapists that sit down with the parents and discuss what treatment would be best for the child with the disability. They take in kids ages 0-3 and they are at the school three times a week. Sometimes, the therapists will go to the child’s house and do therapy there twice a week. The reason why I said we should do something for the Guild School because both of my baby cousins attend that school, one of them has Down syndrome and the other has Cerebral Palsy. Children who have learning disabilities face many challenges in their lifetime. The parents of the children face challenges as well. They have to readjust their lifestyle and run things differently in their household then a household that is considered “normal”. They have to purchase expensive equipment to help them perform daily tasks, readjust their home to make it easier for the child to move around, and take the child to speech therapy or physical therapy.

 The next day, we made a phone call and we set up an appointment to take a tour around the school and discuss on what things they need for the school. They said the needed bibs, and weighted blankets. We also got to go inside some of the classrooms and see what the classroom environment is like. At this time, the kids just got to the school and they where all huddled around a table coloring. One thing that stood out to us while we where watching was the children with the Cochlear Implants. The implants would fall off their head and the kid wouldn’t want to put it back on, or the kid would be playing with it and he would accidently pull it off. When we got back to the school, we started brainstorming ideas on how to solve this problem. After 80+ solutions we came up with, only one stood out to all of us; which was crocheting hats for the kids with the implants. A group member introduced and taught us how to crochet one afternoon and we all enjoyed the hobby. These hats will be personalized to whatever design or animal the child wants, and these hats will fit snugly around the child’s head in case the implant comes off and hat will be able to catch it for they are expensive to replace.

My experience during this project has been very eye opening. It made me realize how children with learning disabilities struggle with every day tasks and how something has little as a hat can help change their lives. Walking around the Guild School and seeing the kids learning really warmed my heart because it made me think of my cousins and how they are getting better every day that they are there.