

# Spotlight: Alexandra Conliffe

Alexandra Conliffe was one of the first people to contact George and Parker about starting a chapter. “I thought EWB was going to be important,” she remembers.

George was so overwhelmed with emails from people interested in getting involved that he had an informal rule of thumb: someone needed to email him three times before he would take them seriously and respond. Alex met the three email criteria, and she started up the EWB chapter at McGill University in Montreal.

“The organization went on to have a snowball effect with university staff, engineering students, professionals, and non-engineers. That urgency and excitement kept replicating, and it demonstrated over and over again that EWB had set out to achieve something that mattered to Canadians, that they felt strongly

about, and that no one else was addressing adequately.”

Searching for supporters, Alex set up a meeting with McGill’s Dean of Engineering. She didn’t have a real agenda, but thought that the Dean ought to know about EWB. The Dean told her, “Alex, I know I’ll see you again soon, because soon enough you’ll need money. And when you do, I want you to know that I’ll be here to listen.”

Alex remembers, “EWB has always harnessed naivete against a foundation of talent, intelligence, and thoughtfulness. We’ve grown off people with slightly crazy ideas and little experience or know-how,” Alex says, using herself as an example – she volunteered to co-chair EWB’s inaugural national conference, and at the time she had never even attended a conference, let alone organized one. And the Dean’s prediction proved correct – when it came to fundraising for the conference, Alex was back in his office, asking for \$30,000.

Since the beginning, EWB has benefitted from a lot of luck, Alex reflects. Recently, Parker stopped off to visit Alex (who is now completing her PhD at Oxford) on his way to Ghana, and Alex printed off some agricultural subsidies articles for him to read on the next leg of his flight. Somehow, Parker ended up sitting next to Ghana’s Minister of Agriculture on the plane, and they were both reading about agricultural subsidies, providing the perfect start to a conversation between the two of them.

“Luck happens all the time, and the people in EWB are smart and competent enough to take advantage of it,” Alex says. “The real trick is in using that luck to build something great.”