The Northwestern University Chapter of Global Architecture Brigades is focused on delivering solutions within the scope of environmental, economic, and social sustainability. We have been very fortunate to have the support of ISEN over the past three years and would like to begin by thanking you very sincerely for your support.

As you may know, the organization had a change of destination at the last minute. While the previous grant proposal discussed the opportunity to complete the health center we started constructing last year in El Cantón, Honduras, we were not allowed to go due to a safety risk increase by the State Department for the country of Honduras. The University covers students who elect to study abroad with an international emergency insurance program; this program – called ISOS – is in place to rescue students from abroad, should there be an outbreak of violence in the country of study. We were saddened to hear that levels of unrest in the capital of Honduras became unsettlingly high. This upgrade occurred just ten days before our departure date, we were told the trip was cancelled, and that there was nothing that could be done to salvage it. Luckily, the Global Brigades organization has been wanting to start an architecture program in Nicaragua, and the idea of traveling there was presented to chapter president, Frank Cummins, and vice president, Ryan Yang. After many meetings and emails, Mr. Cummins and Mr. Yang were able to gain support from the engineering school to change the destination to Nicaragua. Five days later, seven people were on a flight to Central America, about to embrace what can only be described as a wonderful and life-changing experience.

With the funds received from ISEN, the Northwestern chapter was able to travel to Nicaragua and build a home for a family that desperately needed a cleaner living environment. The community of El Limón is largely agrarian, and there is very little active growth in their standard of living. One of the largest environmental concerns facing the community is the widespread shortage of homes with concrete floors and walls. The majority of these homes have dirt floors and mud walls, which function as breeding ground for disease-laden insects. It is not uncommon to lose a young child to a dirt-borne disease, as infants are always crawling on the ground. By providing families with concrete floors and walls, the prevalence of such disease is eradicated. It is through this effort, that we live out our promise to be environmentally sustainable.

The second sustainability touchpoint the Global Architecture Brigades embraces is that of economic sustainability. Materials for the home were all purchased locally so that the economy of Nicaragua can benefit. By dealing with local suppliers, we are not only providing revenue for their individual businesses, we are also driving growth in their surrounding economy.

Finally, the third touchpoint is that of social sustainability and empowerment. One of the most beautiful things about the way the trips are organized is this: brigades do not merely arrive at the site and push onto the locals what they think are better construction practices. Rather, they work collaboratively with the people to improve their infrastructure. Many of the brigadiers were at least conversational in Spanish, and they worked to break down the
language barrier to ally with the locals. A mutual exchange of knowledge quickly blossomed. A wonderful example of this is seen in the way the community makes concrete. The people of Nicaragua do not have access to a gasoline-powered concrete mixer and resort to shovels and buckets to make the critical “mezcla,” or concrete. In the US, concrete trucks are prevalent and can deliver tons of material at a time. In Nicaragua and Honduras, the hilly terrain and scarcity of gas stations would make a gas-powered mixer relatively useless. Seeing this need, chapter president Frank Cummins and Ryan Yang plan to submit a proposal to the Design Thinking and Communication engineering program for Freshmen. The proposal will call for a human-powered concrete mixer that is easily assembled and low cost. If the freshmen engineers can design a functional mixer that meets these criteria, it can be replicated in any of these communities. By providing them with a functional concrete mixer, GAB can dramatically increase the construction efficiency. With this efficiency increase, there is potential to tackle more projects and help even more people. It is in this way, that GAB lives out its mission to provide social sustainability and empowerment to communities in need.

Without ISEN’s support over the last three years, this need would not have been realized. The Northwestern chapter of Global Architecture Brigades is excited to see what comes of this proposal for next Fall. This reality exemplifies how NU GAB is looking to the past, present, and future: towards experience, possibility, and innovation.

We will conclude by thanking you for your support of our past, present, and future endeavors. We are both humbled by the past and excited for the future. The Northwestern University chapter, founded just four years ago, has been able to contribute to the building of a school, a health center, and now, an entire home. This could not have been accomplished without the generosity and trust of ISEN. Because of your help, the Global Brigades organization is planning to expand outreach from Honduras and Panama – launching an architecture program in Nicaragua. The chapter leaders are thrilled that our collective efforts have resulted in positive growth for the group, the students at Northwestern, and the communities in Central America.

Thank you again for your support, from the bottom of our hearts.

Very sincerely,

Ryan Yang
Chapter Vice President and Financial Representative

Frank Cummins
Chapter President