

INTERVIEW/FEATURE



Ms Janice Lathen.

BANJIKA Secondary School in Karatu District, Arusha Region, has made great strides in training students on new technology, says the Founding Executive Director, Ms Janice Lathen, who is based in New York. In this exclusive interview that she granted to Our Staff Writer Jaffar Mjasiri, she explains that since June 2009 , ithe establishment has conducted seven Technology Tent training sessions and has trained 255 students at Banjika.
Read excerpts

QUESTION: Give brief account of the activities that are undertaken by your organization?

A: Powering Potential provides solar-powered modern computer laboratoriess with training to schools in rural Tanzania. We call this programme The Technology Tent.

Q: What inspired you to donate and install a satellite Internet dish at Banjika Secondary School?

A: It was the idea of Anand Sethupathy who is an advisor to Powering Potential. He wanted to provide Internet access to the school. He provided most of the money to make it happen.

Q: What are the major challenges facing your organization?

A: I wish my Kiswahili was better. You would make things easier. Raising money is always time-consuming. Phone and Internet communication between the US and Tanzania is sometimes unreliable.

Also it is very important to me to act with the utmost respect for the values of the Tanzanian culture and to incorporate them into the work of Powering Potential that is an ongoing learning

experience for me.

Q: Why did you decide to set up this project in Arusha?

A: I was a tourist and the safari company took us to visit Banjika Secondary School in Karatu District. We tourists stood in front of the classroom and introduced ourselves. I introduced myself in Kiswahili and the students exploded into applause.

I was so moved by their spontaneous, passionate appreciation of my effort to speak Kiswahili. To me it was just a little thing. It was a way of showing basic respect. My heart was leaping out to them; I felt deeply appreciated.

I wanted to return and spend more time with these people who were giving me such a beautiful feeling.

Q: Who are your major financiers and stakeholders?

A: Individuals from the US, Segal Family Foundation, US Embassy in Tanzania and Oswald Family Foundation.

Q: How do you involve the local communities in this project?

A: I discussed the projects with the headmasters and Mr Mbwambo, the

Karatu District Education Officer. We worked out details together (bega kwa bega) to design the projects. I have met with Mr Mathew Sedoyeka, Karatu District Commissioner, to get his advice.

I also received advice from Mr Kalinga and Mr Ponera at the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training. After my initial training session, the Banjika teachers are now conducting the technology training sessions. Students have also served as assistant teachers.

Q: What is the role of the local communities?

A: The communities contribute necessary resources. For our next project, installing more computers at Banjika Secondary School, the community will provide tables and chairs for the new computers. Also, the District Education Officer will pay for four computers.

Q: How long has this project been running?

A: Powering Potential started in 2006. With the help of generous donors, I brought the first computer for the school early 2007. The solar energy system was installed in November 2007 and five more computers were installed in 2008.

Our first formal Technology Tent training session was held in June 2009. We started working on the satellite Internet project in May 2009. The satellite dish was installed in September last year.

Q: What does your organization aim to achieve when the project is accomplished?

A: We see no end in sight! We would like to install solar-powered modern computer laboratoriess with training at every school in Tanzania.

Our vision: All students in Tanzania experiencing the joys of technology: efficient production, easy access to information and communication with others.

Our mission: Use technology to enhance education and stimulate imaginations of students in Tanzania while respecting and incorporating values of the local culture -- especially cooperation over compe-



JANICE shares in a memorable photo with some students of Banjika Secondary School in Karatu District, Arusha Region.

tion, community over the individual, modesty over pride, and spirituality over materiality.

Q: What is the time frame for this project?

A: Our upcoming project is to install more computers at Banjika Secondary School so they offer Computer Studies as part of their curriculum. We also are planning a Technology Tent Trainer programme for Form Four leavers from Karatu District.

If all goes according to plan, the computers will be installed in March and the training will start in June 2011.

We started working on the satellite Internet project in May 2009 and the satellite dish was installed in September last year. We spent many months researching various options for Internet access in rural Tanzania.

We decided to use SimbaNet and we have been very happy with their service.

Q: How viable is this project in terms of sustainability and transfer of technical know-how?

A: It is very viable. The headmaster at Banjika, Mr Justine Joseph, has initiated an effort for the school to pay for the monthly Internet costs and I believe he will succeed.

Also, Mr Mikate, the head of the solar energy company (Ensol), came to the school and instructed the Banjika assistant headmaster, Meshack Muyinga on the proper care of the solar energy system.

We also have a team of technical people in Arusha town who work with the school staff so they can properly maintain the computer network. We work with a non-profit organization, Solar-Aid.org. Their assistance has been very valuable.

They give Powering Potential and the school, advice and materials on the proper design and care of the solar energy system.

They will also be assisting us when we expand our solar energy system to accommodate more computers at Banjika.

Powering Potential's Country Director, Albin Mathias, is a resident of Karatu, and pursuing a Bachelor of Engineering degree in information systems and network engineering in Dar es Salaam. On his holidays he provides technology training at Banjika.

Q: Do you intend to replicate this project elsewhere in the country?

A: Yes, we have plans to install solar-powered modern computer labs at two other Karatu district schools in September. We will also provide technology training jobs to Form Four leavers who have graduated from The Technology Tent training course.

We would like to continue our work until every student in Tanzania is experiencing the joys of technology at their schools.

Q: What is the reaction of the students in appreciation of this project?

A: The students seem enthralled with what they are being exposed to. The Internet is opening a whole new world to them, enhancing their education and stimulating their imaginations. The students have sent me many expressions of appreciation.

Here are a few: I am very happy to attend these training. It has been very happy for me to get this chance ñ Janice; I learn a lot through technology tent, in every tent I always gain new knowledge. I like that.

The motive to write this short message to you is just to thank you for your good teaching of technological tent. At first I didn't know how to open computer and close it properly also I didn't know printing and typing.

Also I didn't know how to open and close camera, but now I know all. Thank you very much for your generosity and good teaching. I will never forget you. I pray to Almighty God for you to live a long life.

When i was in the Course at Technology Tent I would say to myself: iWe Tanzanians; this time is not the time of sleeping. It is the time of working hard in order to live better lives. i And from a Banjika teacher came a message saying:

"It is a truth that cannot be hidden. Technology Tent has acted like a light for the kids at Banjika. It makes the kids feel able to face the challenges which are being brought forward by science and technology.

"Before Janice came to our school, no one knew anything about the Computer. They did not know even how it looked like. It is amazing that now the kids are able to type something by computer and print it with their own hands. These are great development strides."

Q: Do you enjoy enough cooperation from the school teaching staff?

A: Yes definitely. They are very patient with me! And Banjika will soon have a full-time Tanzanian computer teacher. This will

enable the school to expand technology training for teachers and make it easier for them to teach their subjects using the resources available with the technology.

Q: What major constraints face students in learning this technology?

A: I can't think of any. They have embraced the technology with their whole hearts and are learning quickly.

Q: What approach are you using in helping the students to acquire Information Technology (IT) skills?

A: Since June 2009 we have conducted seven Technology Tent training sessions and have trained 255 students at Banjika. These sessions are now taught by Tanzanian teachers which I think is important.

The students learn theory and acquire practical hands-on computer experience. If you go to www.youtube.com/poweringpotential you will see videos of The Technology Tent in action.

Q: Will this training help the students to be computer literate?

A: Definitely. That is a main point of the training. It is our expectation that the computer skills, which the students are acquiring, will help them get a job after graduating from secondary school.

Also, those students who go on to Form Five have an advantage because they are now computer savvy and it helps them in their studies. It also helps the Banjika teachers who go back to college or university to get a degree. They also need to be computer literate in their studies.

Q: What advice do you have for NGOs and education based organization in terms of helping children acquire this new technology?

A: Work with headmasters and government officials to design your programmes with their needs in mind. Seek to understand and be respectful of the values of the Tanzanian culture. Use Tanzanian technology professionals. Learn Kiswahili!