May 27, 2014

http://theoptimist.com/powering-potential/#sthash.Q3ikrPrI.dpuf

Society

Powering potential

Bringing electricity and computers to schools in Tanzania, one classroom at a time.
By Janice Lathen & Barbara Burr

Powering Potential is a non–profit that provides solar panels and computers to schools in rural Tanzania, which lacks sufficient textbooks, electricity, and has a shortage of qualified teachers. Powering Potential's purpose is education through technology– giving schools in need the tech necessary to create an optimistic future for upcoming generations.

The organization is the brainchild of Janice Lathen, a tech entrepreneur and ex–consultant, who gave up her 20-year business in New York to bring computer literacy to Tanzanian schools.

Lathen got the idea for Powering Potential during a trip to Tanzania in 2006. During her visit Lathen went on a tour, one of the group's stops was at the Banjika Secondary School.

Once at the school members of the tour group introduced themselves to the students in English, but when it was Lathen's turn she said "Jina langu ni Janice. Mimi ni mwalimu. Ninafundisha elimu ya kompyuter." The crowd erupted in applause and the children were overjoyed. Lathen studied Swahili in preparation for the trip, what she said translates to "My name is Janice. I am a teacher. I teach computer classes."

In that instance Lathen was captivated by the joy and appreciation of the students at Banjika. When Lathen returned home she began raising money to purchase solar panels and computers for Banjika Secondary School.

A year later Lathen returned to Tanzania and donated a laptop to Banjika Secondary School. Since the school had no power the headmaster would charge the laptop batteries at home. This donation changed the student's conception of a computer, from merely an idea to a tangible device they could learn from.

Students using the laptop Lathen donated in 2007.

In 2010 a satellite dish opened the path to the Internet, and in 2011 the lab was complete with 20 computers ready for students to use. In one year there was a 500% increase in the number of students transferring to Banjika to access their computers. The national Information and Computer Studies courses are now part of Banjika's curriculum.

A cornerstone of Powering Potential's program is the RACHEL platform, a powerful education tool loaded on all the computers at Banjika Secondary. RACHEL, developed by worldpossible.org, is a software program that has everything from Wikipedia articles to heath guides, literature books, and music theory software, among other useful educational pieces, all accessible without having to connect to the Internet.

Lathen teaching at a school in Tanzania.

As of 2014, six schools have been supplied with 75 computers powered by solar energy, providing modern educational resources to more than 4,500 teachers and students. With requests from schools across the country, Powering Potential is planning a national expansion.

Ongoing financial support is coming from Tanzanian individuals, corporations and the government as well as U.S. citizens, corporations and foundations. You can donate and find out more about Powering Potential on their website.

- See more at: http://theoptimist.com/powering-potential/#sthash.Q3ikrPrI.dpuf