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Janice Lathen

Founding Executive Director, Powering Potential



Growing up, Janice Lathen probably never imagined that her destiny would ultimately lead her to change the lives of children in the Tanzanian village of Karatu. Born into "a family of pioneers" in the little town of Winner, South Dakota, and raised in Minnesota, Janice moved to New York City upon graduation from Minnesota's College of Saint Benedict in order to pursue her dream of becoming a classical stage actress. Even though she acted for the likes of Woody Allen, Robert Downey, and Zoe Caldwell, however, "I couldn't make a living at it," Janice admits. So, she turned to modeling for Halston, Christian Dior, and Karl Lagerfeld, and "supported myself very well," as she puts it.

After three years, however, Janice wanted to try something different, so she found a temporary job with a Japanese bank. There, she began working on an early model of the Macintosh computer, which then had just three programs: MacWrite, MacPaint, and MacDraw.

"I was fascinated," Janice recalls. She joined a Mac User Group, in which Apple customers share best practices and ideas.

At about that time, she also found a permanent job with a cable TV company—and learned something important about herself. "A 40-hour job in a corporation just isn't for me," she reveals. She put an ad in the Mac User Group newsletter promoting her services as a freelance computer consultant—and found herself with a computer consulting business that would sustain her for 25 years.

Into Africa

Although Janice had traveled all over Europe and the U.S., visited Thailand, and spent her college junior year in Vienna, Austria, the demands of her business prevented her from traveling much during the two decades leading up to 2006. That year, however, she found herself with some "extra money" that she had planned to invest in home improvements. She had always wanted to visit Africa, however, so she decided to realize that dream instead. On her cousin's recommendation, she chose Overseas Adventure Travel (OAT) to take her there.

One of the things Janice did to prepare for her adventure was search Craigslist for a private instructor to teach her the fundamentals of Swahili. "I wanted to go beyond the standard phrases," she says. "I wanted to learn the basic grammar and structure of the language, so I could speak to the people in their own language as a way of showing respect." As it happened, that decision changed not only her own life, but the lives of schoolchildren in Tanzania, too.



Opening Eyes—and Hearts

The turning point occurred during a visit to a secondary school in the village of Karatu. During that visit, each traveler introduced him or herself to the students. Janice made her remarks in Swahili. The response? An explosion of applause. "They were so appreciative, my heart went leaping out to them," Janice says. "I decided then and there that I wanted to come back and spend some time with the people who gave me such a beautiful feeling."

She also determined that she wanted to do something to help the students. "I decided I would go home, raise money, buy ten computers, and show them how to use them," she reports. She shared her idea with the assistant headmaster, who told her, "Oh good, we should be getting electricity soon." Janice was taken aback, wondering, "How do I do this with no electricity?"

When she approached Grand Circle Foundation with the idea, support was modified by the notion that a computer lab at Banjika Secondary School in Karatu might be premature. Still, Janice was put in touch with a fellow OAT traveler, *Susan Rickert*, whose fundraising efforts on behalf of the Karatu schools are unparalleled. "I called Susan, and she said, 'Go, girl!'" laughs Janice. "She said, it may be beyond what they need, but if you want to put your heart into it, go for it!" The two have remained good friends ever since.

From a Single Laptop to a Computer Network

Because of the lack of electricity, Janice decided first to raise money for one laptop with two long-life batteries, which the headmaster had agreed to take home to recharge. She began by contacting members of her OAT small group who had expressed an interest in supporting her idea, as well as family and friends. "Whenever I ran into people, I'd tell them what I was doing, and they offered to contribute without my even asking. It was amazing!" she says. Even a stranger in a coffee shop was persuaded by her passion for the project to send her a check for \$1,000. Because she didn't want the checks written in her name, she set about setting up a

separate bank account. Powering Potential was born.

By the spring of 2007, Janice personally delivered the laptop to Banjika Secondary School, to a classroom in which most of the students had never even seen a computer before. "I received a beautiful expression of thanks from them," she says. "It made me cry."



She realized, however, that electricity would be needed if more computers were to be provided, so her fundraising efforts turned toward installing a solar energy system for the school. Making the computers compatible with solar power posed another challenge for Janice. "Most computers and monitors run off AC current, but solar produces DC," she explains. "You can convert it to AC, but you lose about 30 percent of the energy produced."

Ever resourceful, she was able to find computers and monitors that not only run off a DC current, for maximum efficiency, but also are designed to function well in the extreme climates that are common in developing countries. Just a few months later, in the spring of 2008, five computers, a printer, and a server were installed at Banjika—"a small network," Janice points out.

Computer Camp for Students

In 2008, Grand Circle Foundation donated the international airfare for Janice to return again to Tanzania, to attend the graduation of the first class of students to use the computers she had provided. During that trip, she recognized a lingering need to provide formal computer training, so she set about teaching the subject in which she was an expert. "I love teaching. It's my specialty," she says. "It's been at the core of my computer consulting business for 25 years."

She developed the idea of a month-long intensive computer training program, to be held in June, when school was not in session. "It was like a summer computer camp," she says. "I called it The Technology Tent." Her underlying idea was to create a self-sustaining program in which the participants would pass along their knowledge to the other 565 Banjika students.

Thirty-six students (12 students each week for three weeks) made that commitment for the first Technology Tent, held in June 2009. For three hours a day, they attended classes that taught them the basics of hardware, networks, file management, word processing, spreadsheets, digital photography, and solar energy.

For the first two weeks, Janice herself led the training, assisted by two Banjika teachers and two American Ph.D. candidates in computer science. Then, during the third week, it was the teachers who led the training, under Janice's supervision. Since then, six Technology Tents have been completed, all led by Banjika teachers. To date, 255 students have gained technology skills through this program.



Getting the Government into the Act

As Powering Potential continues to flourish, Janice stresses the importance of working with government officials. She has collaborated closely with the education officer of the district of Karatu, and Tanzania's Ministry of Education has also provided valuable advice and support.

The U.S. Embassy in Tanzania has also gotten involved. Last year, the U.S. Ambassador to Tanzania personally presented Janice with a framed Grant Award certificate for \$5,800 at a ceremony in the city of Dar es Salaam. That grant funded the expansion of the solar energy system at Banjika Secondary School earlier this year. And Janice has been invited by the current community grants coordinator to apply for an additional grant.

With 21 computers installed and Information and Computer Studies courses available next year as part of the school's curriculum, Banjika Secondary School is now "filled up," as Janice describes it. She now is looking forward to expanding into other schools in Karatu, with the installation of five computers in each of two schools planned for October. She also hopes to train the headmasters in computer skills.

With so much activity around the organization—and so much still to be accomplished—Janice took a "leap of faith" a year ago and gave up her computer consulting business to devote herself to Powering Potential full time. Since then, "It's exploded," she says, with more grants coming in and growing support from public and private sector alike.

"If I can do it, anyone can do it," Janice says modestly. "Go where your heart feels most joyful. You just have to follow your heart."

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