

Be inspired by problems in Africa



By Louise Marsland

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Leroy Mwasaru was only 16 and still at school when he founded Greenpact, a social enterprise to provide alternative renewable energy to local communities and institutions in Kenya.



Leroy Mwasaru, founder of Greenpact.

What started out as a high school project, has been featured by CNN, [The HuffPost](#), *Forbes*, UpWorthy, *Grist* and local media in Kenya. And among his many accolades, this 19-year-old is a One Young World Ambassador, a Harvard Social Innovation Collaborative Fellow, a Resolution Fellow, the youngest 2016 Tony Elumelu Entrepreneurship Programme fellow and Royal Commonwealth Society Fellow.

The Greenpact model involves using human waste to provide electricity for homes in rural villages. It describes itself as a clean energy startup which hopes to solve the problem of lack of access to clean energy and proper sanitation that six million Kenyans face.

After being exposed to design thinking, Mwasaru also founded CampBuni, a social enterprise teaching design thinking to high school students, because he wanted to expose them to the learnings he has had and hopefully encourage others to take their ideas and innovations further.

Then there is CommCycle, a trade platform to facilitate peer-to-peer trading that he founded. He is currently saving for college.

After wowing the Design Indaba audience with his ingenuity on the third and last day of the Design Indaba conference, Mawasaru sat down with Bizcommunity.com to talk about his journey.

■ What started you on your journey?

It began with family values I observed back at home. It made me into this responsible kid. It instilled a discipline in me. Apart from this, the attitude of taking hard parts and taking the parts no one wants to take. Magic happens when you step out of your comfort zone. Any youth who is outside Africa could do and achieve lots more.

■ The most important person in your life?

My parents, my mum for always being there for me, my dad for showing me that everything didn't come on a silver platter.

■ What were your main challenges in starting out?

Getting people to take me seriously was a very big challenge. I would walk into a meeting, and people would want to know what a teenager has to do in a meeting. It was experiencing those blockages and defying convention. Nothing can stop me. I am here.

Then there are values that I uphold, but I've had to break some school rules because I wanted to do something, nothing is ever a smooth path. If you follow the system blindly, not everything will be in your favour. You need to defy some conventions and break some rules, it's never a straight path. Of course I'm not suggesting that school rules should be broken!

■ Why go into the renewable energy sector?

I was mainly inspired by a problem. I identified this problem. I started solving it and then learnt as much as I could about the solution. I barely knew it. I looked at the concept behind the problem. I tried to get all these resources. I learned things very fast and learned as much as possible, so I could learn about the solution. I am still continuing to learn. I am inspired by a problem.

■ What personality trait do you need to succeed?

What I believe is a successful trait is discipline; and an ear to always be open and listen to feedback you get from people on the ground and people you work with. That is what leadership is about. You can't just be deaf about what is happening. I take in all this and act.

■ Why teach design thinking skills?

I never knew what design thinking was. I applied to an innovation competition in Kenya and was introduced to design thinking tools. I was fortunate and decided to teach other Kenyan youth these skills. I want to make sure these tools are available to Kenyan youth. It is more of a self-taught process. I practice design thinking. It is not something you learn in class, it is something you go into the field and do it.

■ So what's next for you?

I am trying to save for college, but it is not the end of it. Maybe a platform to further impact my work. My vision is always to do better things. I am fascinated by behavioural economics and applied econometrics. That is what I would study.

■ What is your advice for other entrepreneurs?

Two words: Always stand. It's more of an analogy. As we grow up we are taught how to walk, keep quiet, sit down, don't stand. No one tells us how to move beyond 'sitting and keeping quiet'. We have to learn that ourselves.

ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

Louise Burgers (previously Marsland) is Founder/Content Director: SOURCE Content Marketing Agency. Louise is a Writer, Publisher, Editor, Content Strategist, Content/Media Trainer. She has written about consumer trends, brands, branding, media, marketing and the advertising communications industry in SA and across Africa, for over 20 years, notably, as

previous Africa Editor: Bizcommunity.com; Editor: Bizcommunity Media/Marketing SA; Editor-in-Chief: AdVantage magazine; Editor: Marketing Mx magazine; Editor: Progressive Retailing magazine; Editor: BusinessBrief magazine; Editor: FMOG Files newsletter. Web: www.sourceagency.co.za.

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