Dare to believe your dreams are valid

By Lauren Hartzenberg

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Noticing the under-representation of women at IT events, GirlCode chairwoman Zandile Keebine and co-founders Jeanette Theu and Tinyiko Simbine set out to create a female-only hackathon where women could gather and engage in a safe and welcoming environment.

This hackathon is now an annual event and GirlCode's initiatives have grown to include various other skills development and mentoring programmes, with the goal of highlighting the female presence within the tech industry and empowering women to tackle the status quo with confidence. We got in touch with Keebine to find out more about the inspiration behind the NPO, challenges faced and her views on the next generation of female leaders.

GirlCode founders from left: Jeanette Theu, Tinyiko Simbine and Zandile Keebine.

⊞ *What inspired the creation of GirlCode?*

In 2014, I started working for a software development company and would attend a lot of industry events and hackathons. That is when I realised that there is a scarcity of women in the industry. I would attend a hackathon and it would be me and one other woman and the rest would be male. It was very intimidating and the atmosphere not too accommodating, to the point where I stopped attending the events.

In my opinion these events should be used for co-creation, networking and just having fun instead of having them be so

competitive. The competition at the events is so intense, everyone is just focused on code and I found that they were missing out on the human aspect of it.

I discussed this with my previous boss, and asked if we could host a female-only hackathon at the company. He was very willing to have the event and that was the inception of GirlCode. It was meant to be a one-time event, however after getting feedback from the girls who attended, I quickly realised that there is a real need for initiatives that empower women to be confident in their skills as techies and get a chance to collaborate and meet fellow females in the industry.

⊞ *Briefly run us through GirlCode's initiatives...*

GirlCode Hackathons: Our GirlCode hackathon happens once a year on the first weekend of August to commemorate Women's Month. We invite students, developers, graphic designers and first-time developers to form part of this unique experience by giving them a chance to work on real problems presented by our sponsors, giving attendees valuable experience in understanding business needs and translating that into a feasible solution within the space of 30 hours.

GirlCoders: GirlCoders programme is a focused and structured 12-month programme aimed at teaching young girls various programing and design skills from game design, app development and web development on weekends and school holidays. In order to create a sustainable interest in the IT field, we believe that we need to start them young.

Women Go Digital: The initiative is about providing an introductory course to basic computer and internet literacy for unemployed women. The initiative is still in the works but we believe that equipping women with computer skills is very important. Our country has a very high skills gap and we would like to do our part in bridging this gap. The programme's main focus is to teach skills such as being able to set up emails, browsing the internet, creating a CV, applying for jobs online and using Microsoft Office.

⊞ *As an NPO, what has support from industry been like thus far?*

For the most part it has been amazing. I think that it's easy to support such initiatives because we are solving real issues that are not only unique to South Africa but the world over. Tech companies have a big gender disparity and the world is looking at them to see what they are doing to bridge the gap. From the perspective of the social and economic status of women, and also from the standpoint of the progress and development of the companies, it makes sense to partner up with initiatives such as GirlCode.

We would love to see more companies coming on board and seeing us reach even more girls throughout the country, especially in the rural areas.

▦ What do you think are the main challenges facing women in your industry today?

The biggest challenge is that tech companies are still predominantly white male dominated and so with no role models to look up to females tend to shy away from getting into the industry. The reality of the IT space is that the rate of females joining the industry is declining at an alarming rate, which further impacts the motivation of women already involved in ICT.

Secondly, from a cultural perspective, women are not encouraged to do STEM-related subjects and that negative perception is what deters them from pursing STEM careers in the first place.

▦ Who are your female role models?

I don't have a specific role model. I look up to a lot of women who are making strides in their own right because that motivates me to reach for my dreams. If I had to be specific, I would say Enyo Kumahor. At the time I met her, she was the managing director of ThoughtWorks Africa, and I remember being so inspired and awed by her accomplishment and beyond that her humility and willingness to take time out of her busy schedule to meet up with me and give advice on how to be successful. It was truly an amazing experience and that is when I realised the power in women helping each other.

Our mentor, Charmain Houvet, who is the public policy director at Cisco Systems has also had a huge impact on our growth both personally and as an organisation. Through her experience and guide we have been able to achieve our goals, and that for me is the most important thing about role models... people who have achieved their successes and are willing to share their experiences.

▦ What is your message for Women's Month?

As we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Women's Charter, we must not only look back and appreciate all the work achieved by those women who marched to the Union Buildings; we as the next generation of women leaders must dare to believe that our dreams are valid and that we can achieve more than what society believes us to be capable of.

We cannot continue to be bystanders and let others create solutions for our problems, we are uniquely in a position to create solutions for ourselves. The journey is far from the end and I encourage every young girl and woman to seize all the opportunities and carve out a future for themselves.

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