

## Handle in the wind

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**An African student has found fame as a blogger just two weeks after first experiencing the internet. Elissa Baxter reports.**

William Kamkwamba, a 19-year-old high school student, first saw the internet at a TEDGlobal conference last month in Arusha, Tanzania. He was invited to the event - which aims to promote an exchange of ideas in the fields of technology, entertainment and design - after Malawi's Daily Times newspaper covered his efforts to generate electricity for his parents' farm by building a windmill of his own design.

The windmill is remarkable because Kamkwamba left school at 14 as his family was unable to pay the school fees. Armed only with his intelligence, a book on electricity, some plastic piping and found objects, Kamkwamba built his first windmill, which generated enough power to run a light in his room.

His second, larger windmill uses a bicycle to increase efficiency and was able to generate power for his parents' house and charge car batteries or mobile phones for people in his village.

As news of Kamkwamba's achievements spread, he was invited to the second biannual TEDGlobal conference, where his three-minute presentation about the windmill won him a standing ovation from delegates.

While at the conference, the young Malawian saw the internet for the first time and within hours began Google-searching for "windmill" and "solar energy" and was amazed with how many hits were returned for each search.

Kamkwamba was particularly impressed with the speed at which he could achieve things using the internet. "I was very excited when I saw the internet for the first time," he said. "The internet makes transfer of information very instant."

Back in Malawi, Kamkwamba applied his new knowledge about wind-powered electricity to a redesign of his second windmill, a process he detailed on the blog William Kamkwamba's Malawi Windmill ([williamkamkwamba.typepad.com/williamkamkwamba](http://williamkamkwamba.typepad.com/williamkamkwamba)), which offers step-by-step blog photos of the construction process.

The blog has since attracted global interest, with a Google search for Kamkwamba's name already generating more than 20,000 results, just a few weeks after his story became known outside Malawi.



Riding high ... William Kamkwamba atop his windmill, which uses a bicycle to increase efficiency

A fellow African blogger and new friend of Kamkwamba, Soyapi Mumba, described his first impression of Kamkwamba: "What I like about William is that he didn't join the multitude of people just blaming government or policy makers for his lack of education. Neither did he point fingers at statutory corporations for the lack of electricity in his home. He didn't just sit down and blame his parents for all this, either."

Andrew Heavens, a journalist based in Khartoum, Sudan, says Kamkwamba belongs to the "cheetah" generation of Africans who are not going to wait for government and aid organisations to do things for them.

While Kamkwamba is certainly a cheetah, the migration from remote Malawian village to the global stage of cyberspace has not been achieved alone. He was assisted by US-based Tom Rielly, director of partnerships at TED and Kamkwamba's mentor. Rielly travelled to Malawi with Kamkwamba after the TEDGlobal conference and helped to establish the blog, typing while Kamkwamba dictated the content in his limited English.

With help from friends, the Malawian also set up an email address and an account on Flickr (you can search for William Kamkwamba's photos on the website).

"William was so hungry for books and reference material," Rielly says. "He asked me for a dictionary, which I brought with me to Malawi. But I told him, 'I want to show you something even better than a dictionary.' After I showed him the internet, William commented, 'With computer, you can do anything.'"

Kamkwamba was to get a chance to prove whether his belief in the power of the net was correct when a computer - donated by conference sponsors in the US - was due to arrive in his village last week.

"My future plan is that I'm going to learn to research using the internet," Kamkwamba says. "Then I plan to build a water pump powered by my windmill so we can have water from the well in our house and irrigate our fields. Then, I don't know."

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