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THE MAN AND THE MACHINE ISSUE

EXPLORING THE ETERNAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY, CRAFTSMANSHIP AND CULTURE

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PHILANTHROPY

Making a Splash

SPOUTS of Water is seeking to provide clean water to millions of Ugandans through the sale of its ceramic filters. However, this is one social enterprise that is run on a for-profit basis.

by Melissa Lwee-Ramsay

SPOUTS OF WATER AND ITS CERAMIC WATER-FILTER FACTORY AIMS TO PROVIDE

clean, potable water to millions of Ugandans while still remaining financially viable. We speak to one of its co-founders, Kathy Ku, who shares with us how the concept came about and the challenges she faces in making this worthy venture a reality.

Please tell us more about SPOUTS and what the initiative is all about.

SPOUTS of Water is a rapidly expanding social enterprise that seeks to create a financially sustainable ceramic water-filter factory in Uganda, providing clean water to the 10 million Ugandans currently lacking this basic human necessity. In most developing countries, international agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) give away systems to provide clean water to impoverished areas. This culture of free distribution has perpetuated a cycle of 'free aid' that deprives people of ownership and responsibility. The goal is to take a more sustainable and empowering social enterprise approach to providing access to clean water through the sale of our filters.

How was the idea conceived?

I had worked on various water-related projects through Engineers Without Borders in my first year in college and had always been interested in international development. And then the summer after my first year, I volunteered at an all-girls secondary school in northern Uganda teaching a basic health course. Living with a host family, I experienced first hand the water-related challenges that local Ugandans were facing. I wanted to introduce a household water-filtration system that would be affordable to the local population without having to go through aid agencies. Ceramic water filters were the perfect fit for a myriad of reasons, starting from the local familiarity with clay products. My co-founder, John, and I then travelled to Uganda the following year to do an assessment on the feasibility of the project. We were staying at a dormitory for one the top universities in Uganda during this time, and the first night, when we turned on the faucet and held the water to our hands while brushing our teeth, we saw worms floating in it. After we got over our initial shock, we had a good laugh about it.

Why did SPOUTS choose Uganda as its base?

SPOUTS didn't really choose Uganda as its base. I think it's fairer to say that SPOUTS was started because of Uganda. Uganda has been rapidly changing in the past few years, but when I first got here in 2010, there were very few household water-filtration systems available. And the ones on the market were hundreds of dollars. I saw an opportunity to change that and chose to come back to Uganda. It was hard not to fall in love with the country.

Having decided to go ahead with it, how did you turn the idea from paper to reality?

The first step was to take time off from school if I was going to think about tackling this seriously. Even before we had secured any funding, I had already told the school administration that I would not be returning the following semester. And in the middle of 2012 when we raised our first \$15,000 through



a social venture business competition, we took the money and moved to Uganda. We knew that we would be travelling back and forth for at least some time and partnered with a university in Uganda that provided us with some flexibility in terms of on-the-ground presence. To build a factory, the \$15,000 wouldn't last us very long, so John and I started to drive around industrial areas looking for the best prices. We ended up forgoing a contractor for the entirety of the building's construction. And that paved the way for how we did most of our work.

How do you reconcile social consciousness with financial viability?

SPOUTS more or less runs as a for-profit business. We sell our products for a profit to ensure that we are operationally sustainable. We also believe in end-users paying for our products. What that means is that even if we sell our filters to non-profit organisations, they have to show proof of sale to end-users. We won't partner with organisations that distribute our products for free. For many people, this seems counter-intuitive — why would you stop people from encouraging the widespread use of your products? But SPOUTS believes that end-user purchases are key to ensuring long-term use of our products. Overall, we're trying to produce a market-competitive product that is affordable and enticing to Ugandans.



What were some of the challenges you faced getting off the ground?

I think trying to manufacture something in a developing country is always challenging. On the other hand, a businessman once told me that I could make money manufacturing decent toothpicks in Uganda. He was being facetious, but it goes to show how new manufacturing industry is in Uganda. There are no online stores where you can order parts. There are very few machine shops that could make something with high precision. And especially where we were, a small town in eastern Uganda, there wasn't any mechanics. Human resources were a huge challenge.

Can you share with us some interesting stories in your history?

Being a female entrepreneur in Uganda comes with its own set of stories, and I've come to realise that it mostly comes down to cultural differences. But sometimes, words spill out of my mouth in response to a comment before I have had time to filter them. This past week, an engine broke and I took it to a spare-parts shop to see if I could fix it. As I was tightening the last few bolts after it was fixed, the young male mechanic turned to me and said: "A woman should not be a mechanic." While still tightening the bolt, I barely turned around to ask: "Why?" "Will you manage to have the strength left to push out a baby after this work?" I laughed and blurted out: "That's the stupidest sh*t I've ever heard in my life." He took it in good stride and sheepishly replied: "I am stupid sometimes."

What has SPOUTS achieved since 2011 and what are your future plans?

From 2012 to 2014, we were able to pilot the production, sales and installation of our filters. Internally, we've marked the summer of 2014 as a new start for SPOUTS where my co-founder and I are both able to tackle SPOUTS of Water head on as full-time employees following graduation. We've moved to a new factory site closer to the capital and are currently expanding our capacity to produce more than 2,000 filters per month. Moving forward, you can expect to see our presence grow in Uganda as we set up retail shops and sell our filters through third-party distributors and NGOs.

What would you hope to achieve 10 years down the line?

As much as we would like to see our filters as a fixture in every Ugandan household, we hope that they won't be needed 10 years down the line. Or perhaps our filters will fulfil the role that Brita filters play in US households. Either way, we hope to have provided affordable clean drinking water to Ugandans, mitigating the health consequences that are the direct results of contaminated water. ◇