

TEDxSMU Live Blog

TEDxSMU partnered with CoHabitat, a startup community and coworking space in Uptown Dallas, to live blog the inaugural TEDx event at SMU on October 10. The following is the aggregate postings from one of the CoHabitat bloggers.

October 10, 2009
By Bob Payne

Q&A with William Kamkwamba, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*

As of today, *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope*, is #10 on Amazon's bestseller list. It is the story of William Kamkwamba who overcame incredible challenges to provide hope for his family and village in Malawi by building a windmill to produce electricity and pump water. I talked with William and his co-author, Bryan Mealer.

CoHabitat:

The theme of today's TEDxSMU is "What will change everything?". So I'll ask you that question. William, what will change everything?

William:

Education and communication. Change starts when people know more. So we need to educate people. But people cannot do things alone. So we need the ability to communicate to bring people together and the ability to get the information to the people.

CoHabitat:

Yesterday, you talked to a group of middle-schoolers. It was the only talk that got a standing ovation. Was that your favorite part of the day?

William:

No, actually. It was nice but the thing that encouraged me the most was that all the speakers were saying basically the same thing; we need for this next generation to step up and think differently. They have the responsibility for the future. All the speakers were communicating that same message.

CoHabitat:

Each speaker has their own unique flavor of that message. What is it that you want us to know?

William:

My story is that everything is possible. You have to believe in yourself in order to be all that you can be. Even if things look hard, you can still get your goals accomplished if you believe in yourself.

CoHabitat:

As I was running yesterday, I was thinking about you. What you accomplished may not seem that tough to most Americans because we have so much available to us. But you didn't have the raw materials at hand like we do. How did you get your first windmill built?

William:

I made the long journey to the junkyard day after day. And when I went, it wasn't that I was trying to find a particular thing. I had to go there looking for anything that was usable. I made use of whatever I brought home. That is another lesson I want to communicate. Many times, what you need isn't immediately available. You have to make do with what you have around you. It is often good enough.

Cohabitat:

Bryan, as you were writing William's story, what was your take on his motivation?

Bryan:

William never said, "I think I'll get my family to live off the grid." His motivation was just to keep them from pain. He had a terrible childhood, with the drought, poverty, and famine in Malawi. He just wanted to get water for them. But how he accomplished this goal was remarkable.

Cohabitat:

How's that?

Bryan:

He didn't accept that it couldn't be done. He didn't listen to his detractors in his village. And they were all against him at one time or another, by the way. In the end even his opponents benefited from what he did.

Cohabitat:

What was different about William that made him successful?

Bryan:

Well, first off he wasn't afraid to risk. That is big, but you've got to understand, William was so poor that he had nothing to lose. Sometimes we need to risk as if we had nothing to lose. But what separated William was his tenacity and grit. 80% of success is just showing up. William kept showing up. He refused to quit.

Q&A with Anousheh Ansari

Anousheh Ansari is the world's first female space tourist. That's what she's famous for but it isn't the greatest of her accomplishments. I spent a few minutes talking with Anousheh and her husband Hamid during lunch at TEDxSMU. The Ansaris are serial entrepreneurs. You may have heard the name through their sponsorship of the Ansari X Prize, a \$10 million prize to be awarded to the first non-governmental group to launch a craft into space twice within two weeks, a prize won by Spaceship One.

CoHabitat:

Why are you speaking at TEDxSMU today?

Anousheh:

Change happens when individuals start something that they feel passionate about and take action toward it. I'm hoping that people here won't just see problems that need solving and complain about it, but will actually do something about making a difference and changing it.

Cohabitat:

What was your biggest obstacle?

Anousheh:

Myself. Me telling myself that I can't do something and stopping myself from actually trying it. Once you overcome that I think a lot of new doors open for you. What has helped me is having a great partner. My husband and I sort of encourage each other. Sometimes I'm ready to give up and he tells me to keep going. And sometimes he is ready to quit and I tell him he was to keep going. It's great to find that one person that will always be there with you and will always be there for you, so you can do things together.

Cohabitat:

That's great. I've got that person, too. My wife is awesome. You've obviously done enough for most people's lifetime, but I know you're not finished. What is next for the two of you?

Anousheh:

I sort of live a dual life. My first love is space and the other is my career in technology. My husband and I started a company three years ago called Prodea systems. We're trying to change how people consume and use technology because it changes so rapidly. Sometimes people, especially older people in their generation have a hard time keeping up with the changes. It has created this divide between the younger generation and the older one. We are trying to make things easy so that everyone can enjoy technology. It tunes the way that technology is consumed by everyone, making it easy for everyone.

Cohabitat:

So are you focusing on the UI? The user interface?

Anousheh:

Well, we're focusing on creating a generic platform so that all web sites can deliver content over it and have a consistent UI. When new technologies come out, we just introduce these new capabilities into this same UI. There's no learning the new UI, IP addresses, passwords, and so on. There's one way of accessing all services and applications. It's sort of like an iPhone for the home. It is all encompassing.

Cohabitat:

Would I find this at Prodea.com?

Anousheh:

Yes.

(Hamid scrunches his face a bit)

Cohabitat:

Hamid, you're saying, "Not so much" about the website?

Hamid:

(Laughs) Yeah. You'll get some information but we're not advertising it yet. You don't find a lot of details on the website. It gives you some details but there is a lot of capability that we're not displaying yet.

Anousheh:

First quarter next year we're going to come out with a lot of details and news. We'll put it on the website then.

Cohabitat:

It's interesting. You're going with Prodea. Why wouldn't you use your name? The "Ansari" brand is very strong.

Anousheh:

Well, we never thought of using our name as a brand. Even with the X-Prize. We just wanted to be sponsors and not use our name. We only did it because the foundation thought that there needed to be a family behind the public face of it. We like to live a sort of a private life.

Cohabitat:

Yeah. Good luck with that.

Hamid and Anousheh:

(Laughing) Thanks.

Very humble and approachable people.

TEDxSMU in 4 Minutes or Less

TED, in its own words is “an intellectual circus for ideas. Presenters don’t lecture but rather amaze, entertain and present ideas in 18 minutes or less.” So to distill it is to strip it of its meaning ... meaning that what I’m about to do is a woefully inadequate substitute for the real experience. It’s like when you tell that joke and nobody laughs, you shrug and say, “I guess you had to be there.” Well kids, you had to be there.

Still there may be value in telling you what you missed. So here we go:

Robert Haas

- Aerial Photographer
- Showed us his portfolio and talked about the fact that when you’re that high up, all of mankind’s blemishes and corruptions are obscured. It is beautiful up there.
- Takeaway: Nations need to work against their own self-interest and for the interest of the global community.

Jill Sobule

- Singer/songwriter
- Sang two songs, “If I Had a Jet Pack” (cool song) and one that was vaguely insulting to Texans. Missed the title.
- Takeaway: Nothing? More of a palette-cleanser.

Joshua Prince-Ramus

- Architect
- Said that architects have become cowards because of litigation. They need to be radically creative and proved it with an amazing virtual tour of the new Dallas Center for the Performing Arts.
- Takeaway: Be radically creative! Break all the conventional rules of your industry.

Anousheh Ansari

- Space explorer and entrepreneur
- Showed us video and narrated her 10 day flight into outer space. Used that as a platform to encourage us to “Imagine, be the change, and inspire.”
- Takeaway: Set impossible goals and believe that anything is possible.

David Gallo

- Oceanographer
- Changed all our views of the ocean and its impact on the rest of the earth. Did you know that all 6.8 billion people would easily fit in one cubic mile? Yet we’ve managed to turn the ocean into a chemical soup.
- Takeaway: Our ecology problems are man-made and they can be man-corrected. Do something about it.

Amory Lovins

- Physicist
- Talked about “institutional acupuncture.” How Wal-Mart and others are saving the environment by being aware and proactive. Ford is not bankrupt like GM because of this. Apparently green is good for business.
- Takeaway: Businesses need to share their green technology rather than keeping it secret.

Rogers Hartmann

- Entertainment Manager
- Has Spasmodic Toricollis, a painful nerve disease. Told about her diagnosis and journey and how she’s getting better. Loves to talk about awareness. She was the first presenter of the day to get a standing ovation. She is the real deal.
- Takeaway: See the person, not the disease.

Billy Abraham

- Theologian and philosopher

- Proposed that science can measure human intention. Yes, you heard me. He proposed that it is possible to take neuroscientific measuring instruments and figure out why people do what we do. Talked about the intersection of belief and technology.
- Takeaway: Make illuminating mistakes. Be a maverick. Do things differently.

Lewis Warren

- Pianist/prodigy
- He played a couple of songs for us.
- Takeaway: Dang, if he can be that good at 12 years old, why the *@&\$ can't I be that good at something ... anything?

Greg Harper

- Entrepreneur
- Demoed some eye-popping gadgets. Camera that doubles as a projector. Portable blu-ray player that plays personal video. Tiny, form-fitted noise-cancelling headphones with amp. Other cool things.
- Takeaway: Ummm ... Technology is cool?

Arthur Benjamin

- Mathemagician
- Had folks bring calculators up on the stage. Did amazing mental math in his head faster than the calculator-users. Squared 76,792 in his head and other cool tricks. Taught us how to do it.
- Takeaway: Thinking differently often leads to uncanny results. Buy his book to learn how to do math.

John Araki

- Writer
- I can't tell you what he talked about. No, seriously. He made us promise not to blog about it.
- Takeway: On a need-to-know basis.

Aaron Reddy

- Public school teacher
- To inspire his class, Aaron paddled the length of the Mississippi River, analyzing water samples the entire way. He narrated his slides of the trip.
- Takeaway: Public school teachers can no longer be conduits of information — that's what Google is for. They need to be originators and dramatic communicators.

BL Lacerta

- Improvisational music group
- Five piece band and two dancers did an unrehearsed, unwritten musical piece. I'll have to be honest here, I'm going to have nightmares tonight from this performance. It was as disturbing as it was dissonant. I suspect that the musicians will consider this review as a high compliment.
- Takeaway: I'm just not cool enough to appreciate this "music"

Jeff Talley

- Major General, US Army
- Gen. Talley was responsible for rebuilding Baghdad's ghetto, Sadr City. His strategy was to remove the insurgents by cleaning the city, providing power and clean water, and rebuilding every hospital and school. The new warrior.
- Takeaway: Innovative engineers can solve the problems of drought, hunger, homelessness and disease. Ooo-rah.

William Kamkwanba and Bryan Mealer

- Student/innovator and Journalist
- They shared William's story of his tenacity as he built a windmill with an electric generator out of junk ... at 14 years of age. Provided his village with pumped well water, the only source of clean water within 60 miles.
- Takeaway: Solve problems yourself even when it looks impossible. Don't wait for the government to rescue you.

Tanya Pinto

- Advertiser
- Founded Baal Dan, a charity feeding the poor in India. When Tanya became malnourished, the cure became an inspiration how she could feed the malnourished using a peanut-based food called Plumpy-nut.
- Takeaway: Therapeutic short-term feeding can correct long-term malnourishment. Let's go do it!

Jill Sobule (again)

- Singer/Songwriter
- Came back for a second set. Did two catchy tunes. A surprisingly violent love song called "Mexican Wrestler" and a PG-13 rated one about Googling old boyfriends.
- Takeaway: Another palette cleanser

Turk Pipkin

- Philanthropist
- Told stories of his foundation, Nobility.org and how he fed the poor in other nations, drilled water wells, collected rainwater, and provided computers for them.
- Takeaway: Pick an issue that is important to you and take action.

The Polyphonic Spree

- My new favorite band
- Oh. My. Gosh. I'm blown away. I've never seen a more energetic, drawing, mesmerizing, creative, captivating performance. I counted 14 musicians, including a cello, violin, flute, electric guitar, two full drum kits, two keyboards and a freaking upright harp. The lead singer climbed six rows into the audience. They had choreography. They had 'splosions. Oh, and they sounded great too.
- Takeaway: Don't know. Don't care. Still trying to get my head around what I saw.

TED and Christianity

Posted October 11, 2009

TEDxSMU on Saturday felt like someone took a hunk of liberal California and dropped it into the buckle of the Bible belt. But my experience at TEDx got me to thinking. Why is it that the kind of thinking that is embraced and encouraged by any TED event is so different from the prevailing thinking typically associated with the southern part of the US? Are southerners stupider than the rest of the country? No, of course not. A paper published by Virginia Commonwealth University in 2006 proved that IQ is relatively the same across all states. Some would say that it is a religious thing. Alright, fine, let's look at that.

I am a truth-seeker, an honest one, and one with an open mind. That quest has led me to become a follower of Jesus. But I'm a bit of a rogue Christian. I don't hold to 100 percent of the conservative mindset. So, like a half-breed child, I'm bound to be rejected by most of the Christians because I won't toe the line and rejected by most TEDders because I hold to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

I was utterly amazed on Saturday taking in the TED talks. I was equally dismayed that this potentially world-changing event wasn't originated by the church. If we supposedly have a direct line to God and he is supposedly on our side, how did we drop the ball on this thing? No, seriously. Follow me on this....

Why aren't Christians coming from all directions to gather on a particular day for an event where a speaker proclaims the truth in an inspirational way for the purpose of changing hearts as well as minds? Why don't we regularly come together to hear music and listen to a sage from the stage whose purpose is to inspire as much as it is to inform? Why don't we ... Heeey. Wait a second. Isn't that called a 'sermon'? We do exactly this on every single Sunday.

Okay, so maybe we're not so different after all. So why the animosity on both sides?

Andrea Eberle, a TEDx-er and Christian that I met during the last session pegged it. She said, "There are really two kinds of people that call themselves Christian. One kind's Christianity is based on culture, religion, a set of rules. The other kind's Christianity is based on relationship, a real relationship with Jesus. The former don't like liberal thinkers because change threatens their fragile set of rules. The latter would embrace change because real relationships demand change. Therefore, they would embrace TED."

Christians have got to embrace the differences between the two groups and stop being threatened by having their apple carts upset. TEDders and other liberal thinkers have to realize that genuine followers of Christ really are interested in changing the world because, after all, their role model did exactly that.

Kids, there is way more that we have in common than what separates us.

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