

# Diane Hendrix: Telling the Stories of Young African Innovators

American filmmaker **DIANE HENDRIX** is on a mission – to discover innovative startups led by young Africans in East Africa and document their experiences as they develop their innovations and businesses.

Inspired by her experiences with students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) DLab, a program at the MIT that fosters the development of appropriate technologies and sustainable solutions within the framework of international development, and the MIT Accelerated Internet Technology Initiative (AITI), Diane set out on a mission to seek out the young inventors, innovators and entrepreneurs who are charting a new future for themselves and their

countries that is the opposite of what the African continent has been known for in the past – disease, war, corruption and poverty.

Armed with her videography equipment and a driving mission to seek out these young innovators, Diane landed in Kenya for the first time in January 2011 with no idea what to expect other than the backward images of barefoot Africans living in huts that she had been exposed to in western media. Contrary to this, she discovered a thriving and developed metropolis buzzing with commercial activity, entrepreneurial and innovative Kenyans hungry to make a great future for themselves.

The lively and vivacious Diane was awestruck!

Though she anticipated only visiting Kenya and Tanzania on her first visit, she ended up visiting neighboring Rwanda as well, each time finding young innovators who inspired and motivated her to carry on her project. She found young people who are using the tools at their disposal, the Internet and World Wide Web to learn and create innovative solutions. These are the young people that Diane had set out to discover, meet and follow as part of her Young World Inventors initiative. She was hooked!

Diane has since been to East Africa thrice and has created short video stories documenting some of these young people's experiences. Her goal is that by telling the stories of these inventors, other potential inventors and innovators can learn and be inspired to go ahead with their initiatives. With each team that she is following she is aiming at glean important lessons about innovation and entrepreneurship.

Diane shares her work and experiences in East Africa in an interview with *EA Flyer* Contributing Editor (Science & Technology) **WYCLIFFE MUGA:**

**By WILL MUTUA**





**EA FLYER:** Hi, Diane. Why don't we start with a quick introduction of yourself, and perhaps your background?

**Diane:** Hi! I'm Diane Hendrix, the founder of Young World Inventors (YWI) and at an age when most people retire I decided to go to off Africa and start profiling some brilliant young innovators. I was inspired by students at MIT who go to developing countries to collaborate with locals to create technology-based solutions to local problems and even create enterprises out of them. In particular, my inspiration came from my interactions with students from MIT's DLab, which is a set of courses that teach students how to create low-cost, low-tech solutions to problems in developing areas and AITI, which is a student-run program at MIT that sends a group of students to several African universities to teach a course on computer programming, particularly mobile application development and entrepreneurship skills.



**Q:** Prior to this you were an accomplished filmmaker and teacher at MIT, tell us a bit about that background and why you decided to leave your comfort zone and come to Africa to do these short stories?

**A:** Yes, prior to this I had spent my life doing a lot of production and writing work. I've directed, produced, researched, edited, interviewed and written scripts for productions on, for example, three of the largest PBS stations in the US, including works that have appeared in the highly-rated NOVA series. I've also taught communication studies, mass media and writing at MIT, Harvard, Northeastern University, and Bunker Hill Community College. In fact, one of the entrepreneurs/innovators I'm following in Tanzania, Jodie Wu, who came out of DLab, was my student a few years ago.

I think what struck me was what I kept hearing from my students about the amazing innovativeness and smarts of the

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young people in developing countries; I just had to go and see it for myself. I had the idea in mind since 2009. Initially I thought to do three big documentaries about inventions from three different continents: Africa, Latin America and Asia. And then the recession hit and I realized that was going to be really expensive and I was also bothered by the fact that I'd only feature maybe one story from each continent and that would be it.

**Q: So you've heard all the buzz about the innovation going on here, you're all psyched-up and you decide to go to Nairobi and experience this for yourself. What was that experience like? What did you expect? Had you been here before?**

**A:** I had never been to Kenya before. My only other experience with Africa was close to 20 years ago, when I visited South Africa briefly. I really wasn't sure what to expect, I mean most of what we see on television about Africa here in America is the wars and famines, all the negative stuff. I must say I was very pleasantly surprised to find the total opposite in Nairobi. I mean, Nairobi is an amazing place! The people

are great, and I found some really smart, talented, inventive and ambitious young people there, especially as I followed the AITI team as they taught a short course on programming and entrepreneurship at Strathmore University in Nairobi. The students learned fast and were very creative with the skills they acquired.

**Q: On that first visit you ended up travelling to Rwanda and Tanzania as well, tell us about those experiences.**

**A:** Yeah, that was really great, because I got a more regional experience and could tell a more comprehensive story. I went to Tanzania particularly to follow Jodie Wu's startup, which is called Global Cycle Solutions (GCS). They make and sell bicycle-powered inventions such as bicycle-powered cell phone chargers and corn shellers. These are really the inventions of a local inventor named Bernard Kiwi, who partnered with Jodie to create a business. Bernard's a very inventive man, and one of his bike-powered inventions was on exhibit at the Smithsonian last January. I'm now following another startup called EGG-Energy in Tanzania as well. In Rwanda, I was particularly drawn to a startup called HeHe ([www.heheldtd.com](http://www.heheldtd.com)). They make

mobile applications. Later on I got to make a second visit, from June to August 2011, during which I managed to shoot, edit and produce 10 demo videos about the startups I was following using the funds I managed to raise from a campaign on [Kickstarter.com](http://Kickstarter.com)

**Q: Give us a quick introduction to the startups you're currently following.**

**A:** Currently I'm following four teams in Kenya: M-Farm ([mfarm.co.ke](http://mfarm.co.ke)), a women-run startup that's applying mobile technology to agriculture, Sanergy, ([saner.gy](http://saner.gy)) which is working on sanitation problems, mKulima, which is using mobiles to help dairy farmers and KopoKopo ([kopokopo.com](http://kopokopo.com)), who are in mobile payments.

In Rwanda I have HeHe, a mobile app development company and Shaking Sun ([shakingsun.com](http://shakingsun.com)), an ICT services company. In Tanzania there's Global Cycle Solutions ([gcstz.com](http://gcstz.com)), which I've already talked about, EGG-Energy ([egg-energy.com](http://egg-energy.com)), which is working on rural electrification and AISE ([aisetanzania.tumblr.com/](http://aisetanzania.tumblr.com/)), that works with rural communities to foster innovation and bring locally-developed technologies to scale.

**Q: How do you actually get to do this? How do you fund it?**

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**Who do you work with?**

**A:** Well, funding the production has really been a challenge. I've basically been bootstrapping the project, though I managed to raise some money through *Kickstarter.com*. Kickstarter is this great online platform where you can put up your project and source for funding from people who are interested in what you're doing. I used that money to edit and produce the 10 demo videos, which people can get by contacting me ([www.youngworldinventors.com](http://www.youngworldinventors.com)). I basically work with people I've met on my travels who are interested in being a part of what I'm doing. I met some great people at the Nairobi Innovation Hub (iHub), for example. There's a Kenyan filmmaker, Peter Murimi, who I'm now working with. I love the ability to work across cultures; I think there's a lot we can learn from each other. I'm particularly interested in working with local filmmakers such as Peter to do the stories. I've also got some interns I'm working with.

**Q: What have been some of your other challenges?**

**A:** Well, it's been a challenge figuring out distribution for the videos – but we're working on some partnerships.



**Q: The whole point of YWI is to track these innovators and entrepreneurs and get to know what their experiences are as they build their businesses. What kind of observations have you made so far?**

**A:** Well, it's fascinating to watch the different startups and observe the different

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challenges they're grappling with. One of the biggest challenges some of these startups are facing has to do with teamwork.

It's imperative to start with the right team having shared mission, complimentary skills among team members and equal commitment to the team. This was a key issue for HeHe, Ltd., in Rwanda, for example.

The other challenge I've found is that though there's no lack of great ideas, sometimes the challenge is in doing the market research to find out what the real problems are out there, how to solve them and what people will actually buy.

And then, of course, startups must figure out how to get people to buy what they are selling and how to do that so that they can scale up to reach large numbers of customers.

**Q: Finally, where to – from here?**

**A:** Well, once I figure out the funding I'd like to do a lot more of these stories and create an interactive website for them. I also want to find as many ways as possible to deliver the content – Web, TV, radio. ■

**Will Mutua is the founder of Afrinnovator.com - Putting Africa on the Map!**

