

William Kamkwamba - The Boy Who Harnassed the Wind

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When we think of wind power, we most likely think either of the huge wind farms now dotted across the globe, or the good ol' country windmills that have been the backbone of our outback stations' water supply.

But how often do we hear of windmills being built from scratch, let alone in a poor African nation, such as Malawi?

William Kamkwamba did just this, and we can share his story in his autobiography, his children's edition of the book and also on various interviews and documentaries on him that have been produced, some of which I discuss in more depth below.

I read his book *The Boy Who Harnassed the Wind* a few months back and found it quite moving. It brings home some harsh realities, which some people may wish to remain blind too... but these aren't written in a sensational way, rather just an honest re-telling of daily life, by a young man. But it's not all about hard times and despair. It's about the way William was able to move beyond just accepting his lot in life, to create something remarkable to turn it around — a fully working windmill, cobbled together out of junk parts and what he had on hand.

And possibly the most remarkable thing of all? William was only 14 years old when he did this!

In the short documentary 'Moving Windmills', William tells of his life in his poor village of Mastala, Malawi, where 60 families depended on farming for their livelihoods. Being too poor to remain in school, William spent his spare time (when he wasn't helping with the crops) trying to educate himself by reading library books. One of those books was to change his life, and that of his whole village.

William had noticed that there was a lot of wind where he lived and thought "What can I do to use that wind so that we can have something?" So, he decided to read books which contained information about windmills. A book called 'Using Energy' caught his attention. Consisting mostly of pictures, the one of a windmill drew William to it. Having no real instructions as to how to build one, William worked out, by trial and error and by referring to the picture, how to make one himself!

William recalls the first thing he powered with the windmill was a radio... and that local Malawian Reggae music was playing at the time. He then moved on to powering lights for his home.

Although he had received little interest during the building of his first windmill, and was in fact thought to be slightly crazy by many, when people realised it was useful their thoughts began to change.

Story

On returning the library book, the librarian expressed great interest in his project, and arranged to come and see what he had done... bringing some journalists from a Malawian newspaper along too, who then, in 2006, wrote an article which was to have far reaching effects.

In 2007 William was invited to the USA as a guest at a TED conference. He was also given some wonderful experiences, such as flying in a helicopter and venturing to the top of skyscrapers. One of the highlights of his trip must surely have been when he got to visit a huge wind farm in Palm Springs, California, and to discuss his invention with fellow 'wind man' Chris Copeland of Wintec energy. Apart from his TED talk, William was also interviewed both for TV and on radio, spreading his ingenious project far and wide.

"My dream is to finish my education and in the future to start my own company about windmills." said William "Most people, they want technology, but they cannot use the internet technology without electricity. That's what I'm planning to do, to come up with reliable electricity. Yeah, that's what I'm planning to do."

At the end of this documentary is noted that in 2008 William was due to join the inaugural class of the African Leadership Academy in Johannesburg, which is the first pan-African preparatory school, and thereby taking another step in fulfilling his goals.

Also stated was the fact that in the months following this filming, William added a second windmill, solar panels, bright lighting and a deep water well to his family compound, made possible by donations that followed after his story became known.