

Giving Discarded Laptops New Lives & New Homes by MICAH RUBIN

Becky Morrison, Globetops founder and Mariama Bangoura after receiving her Globetops laptop. Photo courtesy of GlobeTops.

NEW YORK, NY—Before it happened, Becky Morrison never knew her love of African dance and a friend's old laptop would help change the world.

Becky, 33, is a producer who works on big budget projects like the NFL Halftime show and Hollywood blockbuster movies. She's also a professional West African dancer who has traveled to Guinea five times to study dance and dance with the country's biggest private dance company, Ballet Merveilles de Guinée.

"It really breaks my heart people just don't know anything about this country. Yes it's poor, but it's so awesome and so fun and the people are amazing," Becky says.

Over the years she's built a community of close friends in Guinea. During one of her trips, her friend Sekou Sano, the Ballet Merveilles's artistic director, made a request: Rather than bring t-shirts or other small gifts, he asked if Becky could bring a laptop. Shortly before her next trip to Guinea, Becky posted a request on Facebook for old laptops. Within minutes she had 10 responses, Becky says.

"I had an inclination I wanted to do a community project and I thought, 'Gosh there's something here,'" Becky says.

So Becky founded Globetops, an organization that refurbishes donated laptops and sends them to worthwhile applicants throughout the world. It was through Globetops that Becky discovered just how much an old laptop can change a life while at the same time, reducing the amount of E-waste that ends up in landfills.

"It's just crazy that we live in a world with planned obsolescence," Becky says, "...every year or two years we get rid of something that works."

In a report released in September 2013, the U.S. generated 2.44 million tons of E-waste (computers, cell phones, iPods, printers, copiers, etc.) in 2010, of which 27% was recycled. The remaining 73% ended up in the trash.

Mariama Bangoura with her Globetops laptop. Photo courtesy of GlobeTops.

Safely disposing of E-waste remains a thorny problem the world has yet to fully address. E-waste contains hazardous materials such as lead, mercury and arsenic and a lack of regulation has turned developing countries into E-waste dumping grounds with little environmental or health oversight.

In 2010 alone, more than 31-million computers were trashed, according to an Environmental Protection Agency report. While the number is staggering, it further motivates Becky and her Globetops team to get more laptops to worthwhile recipients.

Each laptop's journey begins at the Globetops website where donors decide who will receive their laptop. "Laptopless" recipients are profiled and share how a computer will improve their lives. It is a "self-selecting model," Becky says. "The more projects we have, the juicier it is for donors to look [for] things that resonate with them."

Potential laptop recipients are located throughout the world: Africa, India, the Caribbean and even in the United States.

Photo courtesy of GlobeTops.

Becky finds recipients through her worldwide connections. In Guinea, she utilizes her network and has teamed up with the Peace Corps. Becky also has a strong network in Varanasi, India plugged into the local community. Her connection at Haiti's Cine Institute, a free film school for Haitian citizens, connected Globetops with the Francis Ford Coppola winery that later donated 12 laptops to the school through Globetops. The organization is "very grass roots," she says.

After Globetops receives a laptop, it is tested and rated on a scale of 1-5, cleaned up and emblazoned with a Globetops logo sticker. All donated Apple's laptops are refurbished by the New York City computer store Tekserve and PCs are refurbished by the organizations

dedicated volunteers. The laptop is then packed up and hand delivered by one of the volunteers (they're a widely traveled bunch) to the chosen recipient, wherever they may be.

Adam Reid is one of the many Globetops donors. "I decided to give [Globetops] a laptop and participate because it's such a cool thing. It makes so much sense," Adam says.

"I would have been happy with my laptop going with almost any of the profiles," says Adam, who donated his old MacBook Pro to Mariama Bangoura, a multilingual, 45-year old public primary school principal in Kindia, Guinea.

Mariama's profile (as do all on the Globetops site) features her portrait and explains how the laptop will enable her to digitize school records, allow her to more closely follow and respond to student progress and create a newsletter to keep parents informed of school news.

"A computer will allow us to give our students the firm foundation they need in order to succeed in middle school, high school, college and beyond," Mariama is quoted on the Globetops site.

Photo courtesy of GlobeTops.

When Becky delivered Mariama's laptop in Guinea, a videographer documented the principal's elation, which Adam later watched. "It was really cool for me to see her, over the top, singing: 'Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!' You could tell she was genuinely full of joy."

In addition to receiving the laptop, Globetops recipients, receive a "Golden Ticket" for training at a local "hub." The hubs offer a free course in basic computing skills, web browsing, setting up an e-mail address and Microsoft Office, and graduates receive a certificate upon completion of the course. Certificates are a big deal in Guinea, Becky says. And after a long happy life, when the laptop no longer works, the hub will arrange for responsible disposal.

The hubs are also the center of Globetops' ambition to grow their footprint and introduce sustainable practices beyond just computers. Right now Becky is working to create a worldwide, grassroots infrastructure to move a wide variety of goods. "I'm starting at laptops but it could be cell phones or [even] shoes. We have enough stuff in the world," Becky says, "It's just not in the right places."

If Becky has her way, our old computers, phones, and the endless supply of items that clutter our closets and desks will find a second life. Each item donated is one less gadget that ends up in the trash. "My laptop can either collect dust for ten years," said Adam, "or it can go and make the world a better place."