

RENEW Nonprofit Seeks to Empower Youth At Home and Abroad

Written by Sara Goodwin

Monday, 15 June 2015 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 16 June 2015 10:16



“Together we can bring change” is the motto of nonprofit RENEW and its co-founders Adam Rubin and Uswege Mwakapango. Together, they have launched an educational program to assist youth in positively impacting their community. While the organization has primarily focused on helping Tanzanians, RENEW will make its debut in the United States next month in Phoenix.



When Adam Rubin and Uswege Mwakapango met in September 2010 in Tanzania when they were working together as volunteer program coordinators for [Support for International Change](#), they connected over their shared passion for bringing change to positively impact communities.

A year after they met and several projects later, the duo launched a pilot program in Mwakapango's hometown, Mbeya, Tanzania. The completion of the program marked the end of Rubin's term in Tanzania for the time being, but he and Mwakapango both knew something bigger would be emerging.



In February 2013, Rubin returned to Tanzania, and a month later he and Mwakapango founded [RENEW](#) as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. RENEW is a two-week program that empowers youth to create their own solutions to local problems; it is a way for students not only to transform themselves, but to also transform their communities.

“RENEW is built by young people, and it's for young people,” Rubin says.

RENEW stands for the five principles of the nonprofit: **reflect**—students must be able to transform themselves before they can transform the world; **educate**—Rubin, Mwakapango and other RENEW partners teach students about their areas of expertise; **nurture**—RENEW fosters leadership and life skills of the students; **empower**—it gives students the power to be leaders in their community; and **wear**—building awareness, providing a fundraising tool, but most importantly giving students pride and ownership over their project.

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The first week of the workshop focuses on life skills instructions. This week is instrumental in helping students define their purpose, craft a vision for themselves and create a strategy to find their potential. These things are skills that Rubin and Mwakapango believe should be taught in schools around the world, but they're not.

"These are the things that we think if students and young people could learn these from an early age, not only would it really make them better people, but it could kind of holistically develop them into better leaders," Rubin says.

"We have been having people all over the world like friends that say, 'Hey you guys, this is not just a problem here in Tanzania because what you are telling me now, if I was told when I was in high school or in primary, I could make a better choice of what I want to study in the college,'" Mwakapango agrees.

The second week of the program is focused on leadership and giving the students the opportunity to put their ideas into action. This is the time for students to choose a challenge facing their community and develop a community service project to assist with changing it. The kids develop, create and implement the project all on their own. Mwakapango, Rubin and other team members are merely facilitators and mentors.

Every parent and teacher has a vision of what they want their children or students to be when they grow up. Whether that is a creative, hardworking, patient, etc., what part of daily lessons in the classroom or outside of it are teaching students how to develop themselves into that person their parent or teacher has envisioned them to be?

"There is more than geography; there is more than mathematics," Mwakapango says. "You have to figure out who you really want to be in your life, and when you're in college or in your school, you're using that time to sharpen, to build the kind of person that you want to become and the impact that you want to make to the world."



In the two years it has been in operation, RENEW has reached more than 700 students at four schools in Tanzania. It has increased accountability in education and has helped students realize they don't need to ignore their passions, according to Rubin and Mwakapango.

Next month, the pair will launch a pilot program right here in Phoenix. In the pilot, they will be partnering with Joanie Sirek of [Arizonans for Children](#) who will choose the 20 camp participants, and Christina Wehry of [Happiness Untangled](#), a mindfulness based stress reduction practice in San Diego, who is helping to develop the curriculum.

Looking forward, Rubin and Mwakapango hope to initiate the program in six schools in Arizona in 2016. But their real long-term goal is to create an international movement.

"We see this as a new global model for change," Rubin says. "Really a model for youth-led development but also personal development that we think is both needed and can work anywhere."

All Arizonans, young and old, can help further RENEW. Besides just a [donation](#), anyone can [purchase a t-shirt](#), which not only helps the organization financially, but also helps promote the project. More than anything though, RENEW needs volunteers who are willing to be mentors for the duration of the program and long after it's finished.

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"Who knows what you're capable of more than yourself?" Mwakapango asks. "No one. Nobody. It's just you ... You are the change that you want to see."

RENEW will be hosting a fundraising dinner tomorrow, Wednesday, June 17 at Karma Café in Sedona. The event will start at 6 p.m. and a \$30 ticket includes appetizers, dinner and the presentation. For more information, visit renewchange.org.