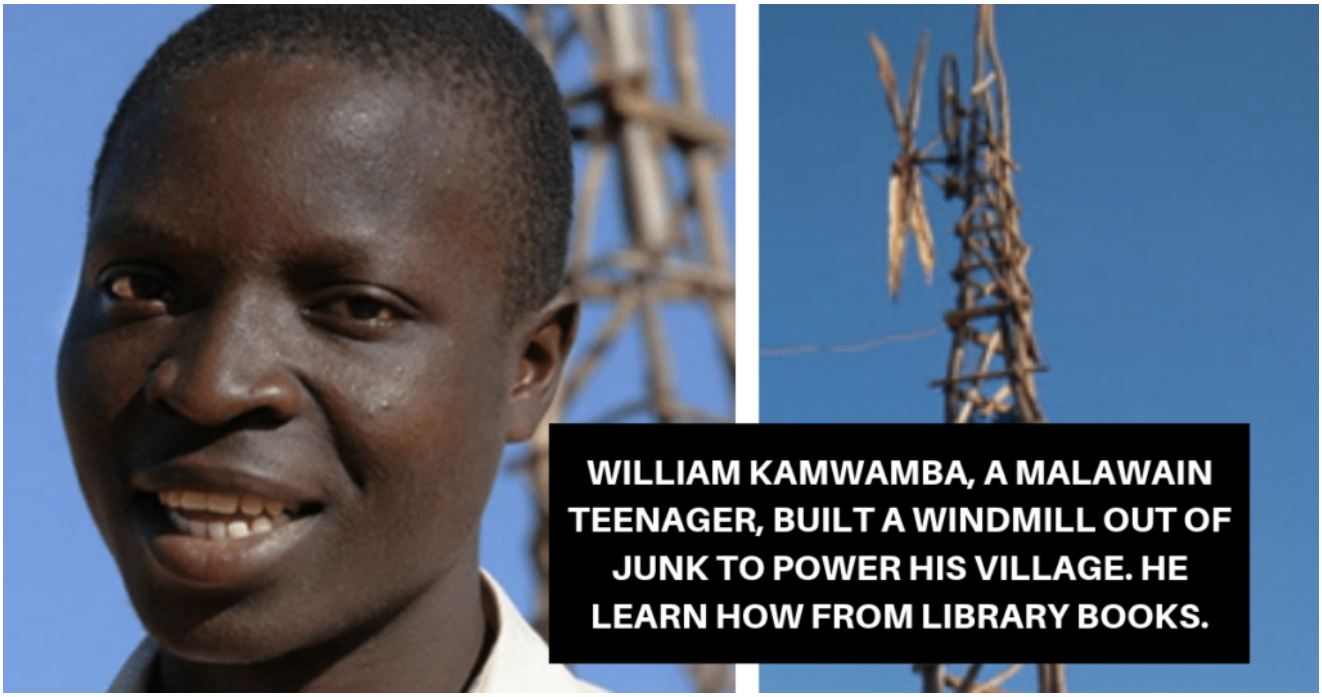
HOME

Malawain Teenager Builds a Windmill from Trash to Power His Village

By bestfolkmedicine · 17/09/2019 · 3 min read



A Malawian teenager William Kamkwamba taught himself how to make electric windmills from trash and gained worldwide acceptance.

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He has been praised by climate change advocates like Al Gore, as well as business leaders worldwide.

His achievements are indeed remarkable and against-all-odds as he needed to quit school at the age of 14 as his family was no longer able to pay the $80-per-year fees.

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His Dream Becomes Reality

When he came back to his parent's small farmland in the village of Masitala, he didn't have a lot of opportunities in front of him. But, he did have a dream- to bring electricity and water to his village.

He decided not to wait on politicians and groups to help him- he continued educating himself with books from a local library.

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The desire and the need for action increased in 2002 after one of the worst droughts in Malawi happened and took the lives of thousands of people and brought his family on the brink of starvation.

The boy was amazed by science and one day, while he was reading a textbook with a picture of a windmill, an idea occurred to him. He was fascinated that the windmill was able to pump water and produce electricity.

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He thought that this type of windmill could prevent hunger in his village and maybe he should try to build one. When he wasn't helping his family on the farm, he was working on a prototype in the evenings on a paraffin lamp.

But, his idea wasn't readily accepted- his project that he presented to his community of around 200 people seemed bleak. A lot of people, including his mother, thought he was losing it- these people have never seen a windmill before.

Collecting Garbage to Construct Windmill

The boy's neighbors were shocked to see that the young boy spend so much of his time looking through trash and a lot of them, as he recalls, thought he was smoking marijuana.

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When they asked him what he was doing, he told them he was making 'something for juju' to which they replied 'Ah, I see'.

Now 22-years-old, the boy made a turbine from spare bike parts, a tractor fan blade, and an old shock absorber, as well as blades from plastic pipes.

He remembers having several electric shocks climbing the windmill. The end project was a 16 feet tall blue-gum-tree wood tower that was swaying over Masitala.

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“Crazy Boy” Turned Genius

When the boy hooked a car light bulb to the windmill’s turbine and the blades started spinning in the breeze, the people around him realized what the boy actually did. Soon, the 12-watt wonder was pumping power into the mud brick compound of his family.

So, they no longer needed the paraffin lanterns and could use light bulbs and a light switch he made from bike spokes and flip flop rubber. Soon enough, the locals started lining up to charge their phones.

The story of this young scientist went viral after a reporter from the Daily Times newspaper in Blantyre wrote an article about him in 2006.

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In the meantime, the boy was able to install a solar-powered mechanical pump, added water storage tanks, and brought the first portable source of water for the region around his village.

He also updated the original windmill to 48 volts and anchored it in concrete after the wooden basis was chewed by termites. Afterwards, he built a new windmill that helped irrigate the entire field of the family.

What Are His Future Plans?

The boy is currently on a scholarship at the elite African Leadership Academy in Johannesburg in South Africa. He has attended multiple conferences worldwide to recount his story, but claims he’s determined to go back home when he finishes his studies.

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He plans on bringing power to all Malawians of whom unfortunately only 2 percent have electricity.

The former Associated Press news agency reporter, Bryan Mealer, was fascinated by the story of the young boy and they’ve spent a year together writing the book which is available for purchase in the US titled The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind.

Sources:

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