

Maasai Education Discovery (MED)

Project Background and Overview

In 1999, Ledama Olekina walked across the United States in an effort to raise awareness of the need for education among his people, the Maasai. In the process, he met individuals who helped him establish Maasai Education Discovery (MED), a nonprofit organization in the United States and Kenya. In addition to funding, Olekina received non-monetary support such as office space to assist with the project launch and long-term sustainability.



Students use computers at MED Community College

Under Olekina's leadership, MED aims to empower the Maasai, particularly women, by providing greater access to educational opportunities. Several of Olekina's earliest supporters serve on the board of directors and oversee the operation of five core elements of MED: a community center, which includes a library and business center; a community college; a cultural art center, where Maasai women and students can make and sell jewelry and crafts to enhance the program's sustainability; short-term volunteer programs for college students in the areas of education, health, and the environment; and community development programs, including scholarships, HIV/AIDS workshops, a rescue program, and a mentoring program for girls.

MED is working toward the establishment of a virtual technical university to educate Africans, starting with the Maasai.

Bridging Tradition and Modernity



Students gather in front of the MED Community Center

By making education more accessible and affordable, MED helps prepare the tradition-bound Maasai for success in the twenty-first century. In addition to expanding their view of the world and increasing opportunities for economic participation, MED helps the Maasai understand why certain traditions, such as female circumcision, are no longer acceptable.

MED has a strong focus on education for women and girls because in the Maasai culture women hold a position of respect in the

household and are regarded as the key decision makers in matters related to the family. Within this social structure, the 900 female students who attend primary school, secondary school, and college through MED each year are likely to have a positive impact on their children's education. For many girls, MED also provides an alternative to an early marriage into a life of poverty.

Creating New Opportunities for the Maasai

A few years ago, Waseem Sheikh, Director of Cisco's Internet Business Solutions Group and MED Board Member, visited the MED education resource center in Narok, Kenya. After learning more about the project goals and MED's desire to bring education onto the Maasai reservations, Sheikh actively sought out support from a variety of sources, including personal acquaintances, college students, international development agencies, and the Cisco® Product Grant Program. Sheikh also worked with the Maasai elders to gain their approval to send children within their communities to school, rather than sending them onto the fields to graze cattle all day.

As a result of Sheikh's efforts, college students from the United States donated hundreds of refurbished PCs to MED and many volunteered their time and funds to support the project. In addition, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) started an Ambassador Girls Scholarship Program and solicited the help of other agencies such as the International Red Cross and Oxfam. Also, Cisco provided an equipment grant to support the establishment of a high-speed wireless network connecting the center to 16 surrounding schools. MED is now offering free network access to hospitals in the area. In addition to enabling remote diagnostics, this capability allows for education delivery in the healthcare sector.

Sheikh also raised more than \$50,000 in personal contributions from friends and family members, which he used to construct a boarding school for 360 Maasai girls. The school began offering the Cisco Networking Academy® curricula in 2004, and 50 students have earned their Cisco CCNA® certification to date. "These young women now have marketable skills for today's economy," Sheikh explains, "skills they can use to support their families and communities so that others may take advantage of the same opportunities."



Ledama (far left), Waseem (left), and MED Board Member Cliff Moskow (right) receive a traditional farewell from a Maasai Village Chief: "Enaisho Ookule – May you remain in blessing and always walk in beauty"

The majority of women who graduated from the academy have already found employment, and those employed contribute 10 percent of their salaries back to MED to promote the program's sustainability. Networking Academy students and instructors in Kenya have also used some of the equipment donated to MED to set up networks at 15 local organizations, including dormitories, libraries, an orphanage, and schools.

To learn more about Maasai Education Discovery, please visit www.maasaieducation.org.

To learn more about Cisco Networking Academy, please visit www.cisco.com/go/netacad.