

Tribute to Gary Marsden

Remembering Gary Marsden

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The morning of December 28, 2013, I got the worst news I have received in years: Professor Gary Marsden had suffered a fatal heart attack and passed away the previous evening. As I reflected on what to put into this essay, I could only think of the lessons he taught me in the years I have known him, first as an academic adviser, and then a father figure, a friend, and a mentor.

It was a Northern Hemisphere summer, and I had just flown into South Africa to start graduate school. I remember sitting in Gary's office, going through possible research topics. Financially, I was broke, and some of the topics on the table came with loads of funding, making them attractive to me. I remember how, right in the middle of contemplating one of the topics, Gary paused and asked me, "Shikoh, are you sure you want to do this? Are you really sure this is what you want to spend the next three to five years of your life working on?" He then taught me the lesson that has formed the basis of my life ever since when he said,

I know you need the money, and that is important, but I want you to do something that you are passionate about, something that you will wake in the morning smiling about, something that you will be proud talking to your friends and family about, something that you believe will help you in your mission of wanting to change the world. Something that is going to keep you going when everything else fails.

We spent the rest of that afternoon talking about my passion to change lives using technology, and going through the various aspects of poverty that we could research and build technology around. That afternoon changed the course of my academic and career life. I ended up doing a Ph.D. that was on the intersection of computer science, social science, and development economics. The main reward was not in the title or academic accolades, but the subsequent lives changed over the years through technology. Very early on, I learned that technology is not a panacea, but rather a catalyst to development; so while I pursued a computer science degree, I knew that the technology would have to work for people in the context and the entire ecosystem in which they live. I understood that I had to first understand people, to find out about them: Who are these people? What do they need? But most important, what do they have? Understanding and answering these questions humanizes the process of technology development, so that benefiting the community becomes a key goal of the solution, so it can have a huge impact. Indeed, benefiting the community is integral in the development process.

This is a lesson that many people who have interacted with Gary have also learned from him.

Instead of looking at Africa as a net consumer, Gary saw that there are opportunities in Africa, and as such, he focused his research across Southern Africa. Gary's work primarily looked at making mobile technology usable for all. Modifying traditional human-centered design processes so that they would work in Africa, he literally changed the way technology research and development were being approached by the computing field in Africa, and his work has built a base for much of the research that is taking place now.

However, in the last few years, Gary's real passion came through. I remember him telling me in one of our "life reflecting" sessions, "Shikoh, I realized I cannot change the world all by myself, so I stopped building stuff, and started teaching people like you to build. That way, my work is more impactful." And so it was. I saw this come true through the establishment of the ICT4D Lab. In it, he deliberately decided to empower Africa by training the next crop of academics. There were many instances when he called me to help him evaluate his carefully handpicked list of applicants from across Africa (outside South Africa) for the Hasso Plattner Institute Fellowship. He believed that, if he trained enough academics and showed them that they held the power to change their communities, then he would have achieved his mission. He believed that the ICT4D Lab was an

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incubator for the next generation of technology leaders and academics in Africa. The group of young academics he helped to mold will be the ones to carry on his legacy.

I believe, however, that Gary's most important legacy is not in academia, as important as that is. Rather, it is the example that he set by being himself. He cared deeply about making a difference. For instance, in one of our research missions, we visited a rape crisis center. That morning, a three-month-old baby had been admitted for rape. That incident greatly affected Gary. He had tears in his eyes, and on our ride back, he apologized that he might not be able to supervise research based on the center, because it was a stark reminder of a terrible problem, one that he wanted to protect his family from. He wanted his little girl to grow up safe, to go to college, and then get married to a good man. I saw a really deep sense of commitment to his family, and I totally understood what this might mean to him. However, a few years later, Gary got a student to work on a health project that tackled issues that we encountered in the rape crisis center. He later told me that he could not just have let go, but rather, that he needed a smart way to handle the project, without compromising the integrity of the survivors. That, for me, is character.

Gary has led and shaped a new generation of young people who are his legacy. I am one of these people. As we develop new technology in a human-centered way, we will be fulfilling what he began. As much as we grieve his loss, we also are called to action by his example. Thanks to him, I am following my dream to change the world for the better. Like Gary, I know I can't do it alone. But just as he inspired me, he has also inspired Africa and the world to create technology that supports and helps people by including them in the process of development. We must remember that we are his legacy, and to be thankful for the lessons he has taught us, even through our tears. ■