

Tribute

Gary Marsden's Genius for Bringing People Together

Jonathan Donner

Caribou Digital

Edited from remarks delivered at a Memorial Service at the University of Cape Town on February 6, 2014

As a colleague, Gary Marsden was unparalleled.

Collaborating with him, I came to appreciate the pragmatism and passion in his work. Gary and his students helped the communities they worked with “build stuff” that worked. That is no easy task in ICTD, yet Gary's balance of optimism, humility, patience, and sensitivity allowed him to excel at the intersections of technologies and community development.

Gary was one of the best mentors and advisers I have ever met. For each of his students, Gary concocted a custom mix of coaxing and pushing, supporting and enlightening that helped them on their career paths. He cared deeply for his students; he invested in their progress and success.

Gary's engagement with the field was deep and natural. One day I saw him give an impromptu lecture to a large gathering of visitors to his university. He sat down on the table in the front of the hall, waving a cellphone around for effect. Relaxed and without a bit of bravado, he spun a story of the history of human-computer interaction and the particular challenges of working in resource-constrained settings. Everyone was transfixed.

Gary's efforts at the conferences I saw him lead were also remarkable, from UBICOMP workshops and ICTD2012 in Atlanta, through INTERACT, and particularly the one at which I got to work most closely with him, ICTD2013 in Cape Town. Everybody had such a great time, and things went so smoothly, they never realized how his subtle touches helped shift the intellectual agendas of those events in ways that promoted inclusion, diversity, and the (re)prioritization of the right questions in the field.

Gary's unique genius lay at least partly in the ways his work focused on bringing people together. For example, he and his colleagues built tools to enable social processes, like sharing and storytelling, which worked for *everybody*, no matter how few resources users had to invest in a gadget. What wonderful, complex, fertile, and human concepts to spend time understanding and promoting! He also developed, promoted, and extended important new approaches within user-centered design, helping bridge distances between designers and users common in ICT4D settings. Gary worked with students and partners like Ikamva, Cell Life, and Learn to Earn, each deeply invested in their communities in Cape Town and beyond; students and partners with intuition and empathy to match and amplify his own.

I wonder if Gary ever knew how good he was at all of this or whether it just came naturally. Regardless, the abundance of Gary's insight and empathy is reflected in the network of remarkable colleagues he nurtured in South Africa and beyond. Since coming to Cape Town, I have been fortunate to work with many of Gary's former and current graduate students. I will continue to learn from each of them as I learned from Gary, and in so doing will stay close to his energy and continue to be inspired by his perspectives. ■

Jonathan Donner, Senior Director for Research, Caribou Digital. jonathan@jonathandonner.com

To cite this article: Donner, J. (2015). Gary Marsden's genius for bringing people together. *Information Technologies & International Development*, 11(4), 37.

