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GLOBAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

**From New York City to Africa:
Supporting African fashion designers**

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A Global Look at Women's Entrepreneurship

From New York City to Africa: a Fashion Week Odyssey

BY LAURIE DeJONG

I've always had a passion for travel, a fascination with different cultures and a love for both the fashion and event industries.

Combining that with a drive to succeed and a yearning for my own business, I opened LDJ Productions in the fall of 1999. Fifteen years later, LDJ is still thriving and in addition to producing events in and around the fashion industry, has moved into other arenas such as tech, beauty and corporate conferences.

One of the events we produce in New York City, Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week, is considered to be one of the marquis fashion events in the world. LDJ is responsible for building the infrastructure of an 80,000-square-foot temporary tent that incorporates a large entry lobby showcasing the many event sponsors, and the build-out inside that includes three show venues that seat between 300-1000 people each.

This structure plays host to almost 200 designer fashion shows a year. Once the structure is built, the LDJ venue management team manages the day-to-day operations of this eight-day event and our overall core team manages the hundreds of people hired to assist in the smooth running of the shows.

This high profile event requires that we remain calm in a very hectic and high-pressure environment. A designer's 10-minute show is their one opportunity to present their seasonal collections to the global fashion community and one wrong step can make or break a career.

Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week is one of the largest events in New York, bringing \$1.6 billion dollars of annual tax revenue to the city. More than 100,000 people come in and out each season. The smooth and safe operation of the tents is vital to the success of the event and it is not a job for the faint of heart.

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Rwandan fashion designer Colombe Ituze Ndutiye (inset) with one of her designs on the runway at Kigali Fashion Week.



In 2009, I was fortunate to receive an Entprising Women of the Year Award, honoring LDJ Production's rapid growth throughout the years. During the ceremony, guests were introduced to the Institute for Economic Empowerment of Women's PEACE THROUGH BUSINESS program. Little did I know then that it would be a life-changing moment in my career as a businesswoman. Through the PTB program I began my journey as a mentor to a Rwandan designer named Colombe Ituze Ndutiye. Due to calendar conflicts, Colombe and I did not have a typical PEACE THROUGH BUSINESS experience, but formed our own mentor/mentee relationship that worked well for us.

Through Colombe I met Madame Rose Kabuye, former Rwandan Army leader, first mayor of Kigali and former Chief of Staff to Rwandan President, Paul Kagame. Rose shared my love for fashion and she and I became fast friends and discussed everything from politics to fashion trends.

It was during one of our conversations that Rose stated her dream was to have a fashion week in her country. It was then that I realized how simple a concept it would be to take our skills and knowledge learned through years of producing New York Fashion Week to the ground and assist with the production of a Fashion Week in Kigali.

With little research, we realized that fashion has great potential to jump-start an economy by providing jobs in both city and rural areas and is one of the few entrepreneurial options for women in developing nations. Conversations turned into

planning sessions and before we knew it, we were on our way to producing the first fashion week in the country of Rwanda.

Thus began one of the greatest chapters in the life of LDJ. Producing a large-scale fashion event with a fraction of the resources we had grown accustomed to presented difficult challenges for our team.

Initially we set out using the same schedules and procedures we had always used in New York but quickly learned that we would have to adapt them to the work-

Above: Laurie DeJong of LDJ Productions teams up with Robert Centenary, a tour operator in Queen Elizabeth State Park, who shared his mission of rebuilding his Ugandan community with a health center for women and children. DeJong and her New York-based team have raised enough money to fund a new center for disease testing that is being built by the local community. Photos by Clifton Leach.

ing environment of the growing nation.

Our goal was to teach everyone step-by-step how to organize a large-scale multi-designer event and bring our best practices to the ground. While we knew that the event would take time to develop, we never lowered our expectations for both the LDJ staff and the team on the ground. It was evident that we needed the local teams to believe that they could achieve their goals and it was our job to never let that belief waiver.

Fortunately, with the global availability of email, and Skype we were able to communicate with the local teams on the ground. Our production team spent months working through details and logistical challenges, while our show managers spent time working with the 12 designers chosen to participate in this historic event.

In the days leading up to the event and on the ground in Kigali, we ran workshops focused on all aspects of the industry including business, marketing, and craft skills.

What sometimes seemed like the impossible was achieved in Kigali, Rwanda on November 7, 2012: Kigali Fashion Week was produced by six LDJ employees from New York and over 50 local Rwandan resi-

Below: Laurie DeJong places a ceremonial brick in place assisted by partner-on-the-ground Robert Centenary to build a new center for disease testing in South West Uganda.



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dents to a packed house of almost 1,000.

For the country of Rwanda, it was a proud moment for a region that less than 20 years before had undergone the worst genocide in human history. It was also a teachable moment for me as I realized that I had underestimated the overwhelming pride and sense of accomplishment that came, for myself and the rest of the LDJ team, from having worked so hard to make such a wonderfully successful event happen. Teaching skills that came to us so naturally turned into one of the most rewarding professional and personal experiences of our lives.

From that point on, word spread throughout East Africa about Kigali Fashion Week and we have since become involved with fashion weeks incorporating designers from Uganda, Burundi, Kenya and the Congo.

What started as a seed idea to help an emerging market launch its own fashion week has manifested into a foundation run by LDJ employees and contractors called "The Paper Fig Foundation."

Our mission at PFF is to provide developing nations practical hands-on education from western professionals that will create long lasting benefits that the injection of money cannot do alone. Our primary goal is to teach our skills so that the developing nations can sustain on their own. A second and unexpected mission of the foundation is to also provide life-changing experiences for the people that participate in our program. The PFF has become a large part of our culture and we encourage our employees, contractors,



and even clients to participate.

We have launched an internship program that enables African entrepreneurs to travel to New York City to assist in the production of Fashion Week that has been embraced by the entire New York fashion community.

Our work in Africa does not end in the cities. We try to add an element of fun and adventure to our trips abroad. In our travels, we met a gentleman named Robert Centenary who is from a small town in a region of South West Uganda called Kasese.

The region had recently endured serious flooding that caused death and destruction throughout the region. Robert is a tour operator in Queen Elizabeth State Park, but spends his spare time and resources helping his community. He uses some of the proceeds from his business to assist with the rebuilding of his community beginning with the restoration of a health center for women and children.

The health center provides a safe location for women to give birth and care for their babies once born. We asked how we could help and we eagerly got involved by spending time at the clinic distributing baby supplies and clothing we had collected from our family and friends and, most importantly, greeting patients with

smiles and assurance that they were not forgotten by the world.

We have since raised enough money to keep the center open for months and will travel to Uganda this month to attend the ribbon-cutting for a new center for disease testing that is funded by PFF support and built by the local community.

These experiences have turned into one of the highlights of my career. With a little work and a lot of confidence and courage, we have been able to take the skills that we have mastered at home and apply them to emerging markets thus providing long-lasting economic effects.

Watching the local teams learn and improve their craft is very rewarding, as is watching our employees thrive and succeed in conditions far outside their comfort zone.

I've had the pleasure of sharing this experience with my 16-year-old daughter and have watched proudly as she handles ever situation she encounters with poise and professionalism far beyond her years.

Our grassroots foundation, which started with the seed of an idea planted at an unexpected time has flourished into a promising program that I believe has touched the lives of many, at home and abroad. I've learned a lot from these experiences, but if I had to choose two big lessons they would be, first, with an open mind and a little courage, life can take us on unexpected and rewarding journeys, and second, don't underestimate the power of a small group of committed individuals. Anything is possible when you believe in yourself, your mission and the people around you!

Interested in viewing the story of Laurie's work with the health clinic? Check out this video (<https://m.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=HiH8yhXSeg8>).

LAURIE DeJONG leads her company, LDJ Productions, and serves on the Enterprising Women Advisory Board. A past recipient of the Enterprising Women of the Year Award, she will be a featured speaker at the 2015 Enterprising Women of the Year Awards Celebration & Conference, March 29-31 at Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa in Lake Buena Vista, FL. Learn more about Laurie and LDJ by visiting www.ldjproductions.com. 

