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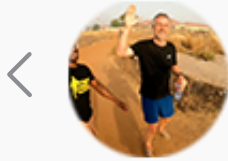CISCO   We Are Cisco   Log Out

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2021-May-25

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Feeding Minds and Bridging Divides

BY DONALD DE WITTE

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When my 84-year-old Spanish mother-in-law received a new iPad in 2017, I was excited for her to explore the online world but wary of her safety.

I reached out to a social club in my hometown of Valldoreix, Spain, and offered to present a session for the elderly on how to stay safe online. Montserrat Roura, a local woman, helped me set up the sessions.

Little did I know that this introduction would trigger a chain of events that would lead to Cisco's involvement in an African digital transformation.

Let me explain.

In 2003, in a small town in Ghana, 10-year-old Ousman Umar was playing soccer when he saw an airplane fly overhead. The sight fascinated him. He asked a village elder what it was.

"It is made by white men and for white men only," the elder said.

"Then I must leave my home to search for the white man who could help me learn about such things," Ousman decided. He did not have access to the internet to investigate these things.

At the age of 13, Ousman left Ghana along with 49 other villagers. He traveled 21,333 kilometers through eight countries, finally arriving in Barcelona four years after he departed.

*Ousman crossed the Sahara on foot, the s
and saw many of his friends die on his four-
Spain.*

A fresh start in Barcelona

Not knowing Spanish or anyone in Barcelona, Ousman lived on the streets for a time. While asking for directions, he met Montserrat Roura, a local woman who bought him lunch and left him her phone number. She told him to call if he ever needed help again.

One month later, still homeless and now questioning why he ever left Ghana, he called Montserrat — one last effort to find local support.

Montserrat offered him a place to stay. Shortly after, she and her husband decided to adopt him.

Ousman was able to start his new life.

Over the next few years, Ousman learned Spanish, graduated high school, and completed postgraduate business studies at Esade, paying his way with his bicycle mechanic salary.

Along with creating computer classrooms in rural Ghana, NASCO also helps train teachers in ICT.

Feeding minds, bridging divides

In 2012, Ousman returned to Ghana and founded the NGO NASCO Feeding Minds, with a goal of providing access to information and education in Ghana to reduce its digital divide.

He created a network of computer rooms in junior high school classrooms to serve as IT training centers for his fellow Ghanaians.

The schools began flourishing, and Ousman authored a book of his extraordinary life in 2019.

This is where my mom's iPad comes in.
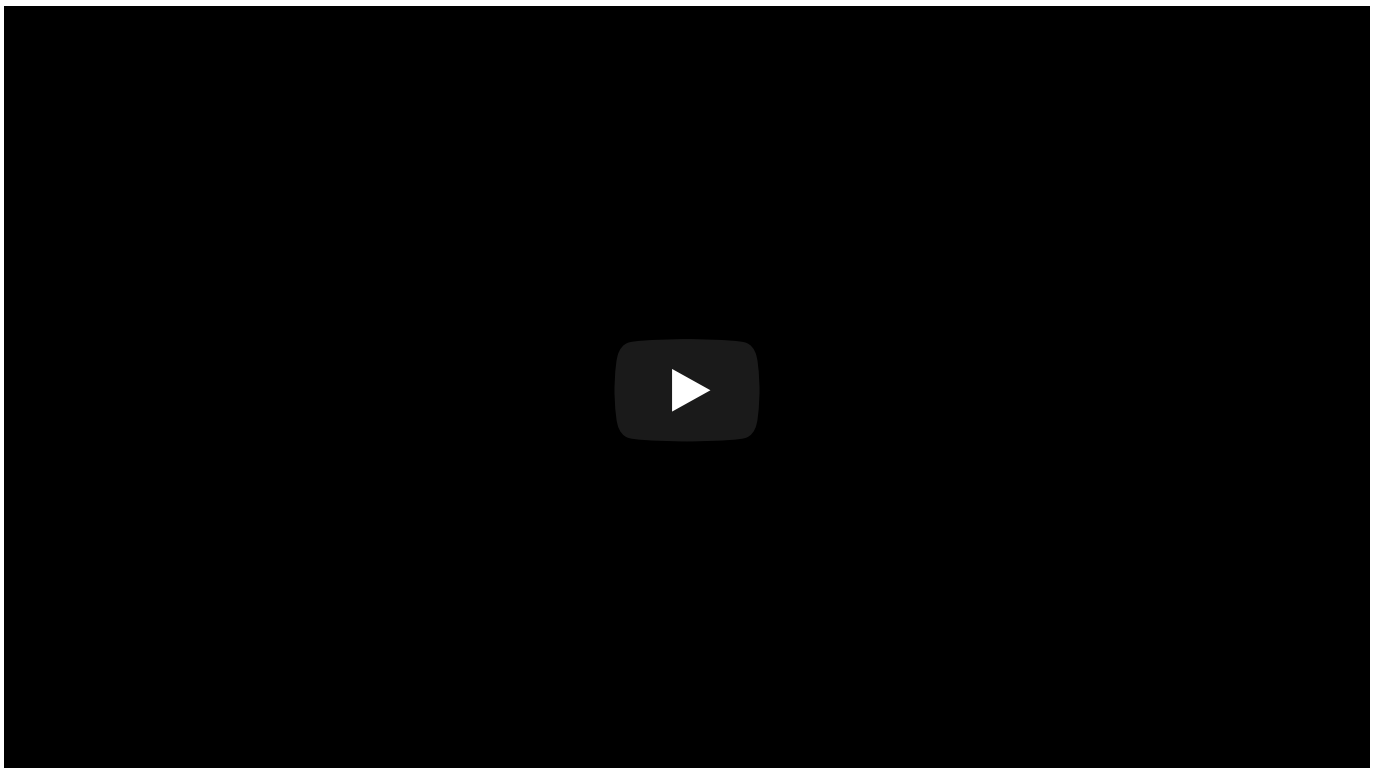
Safety first

As my mother-in-law opened her new iPad, she expressed interest in navigating the internet. I was excited for her to explore the online world but wary about safety risks — all too common among first-time internet users, especially seniors. That's when I offered to present a session on "How to Stay Safe on the Internet."

The wonderful woman who helped me coordinate the session was Montserrat Roura — Ousman's adoptive mother. With her help, the session attracted more than 40 white-haired attendees, who learned about safe surfing practices.

I remained in frequent contact with Montserrat, and it was her who told me about Ousman's book signing and insisted I go meet him. I was intrigued by his story and convinced that Cisco could be the bridge to providing internet access requirements for his project.

Cisco gets involved

I began getting involved with NASCO later that year and helped organize satellite internet access for their training centers.

NASCO and Cisco are committed to providing better ICT education in Ghana.

Cisco donated Meraki switches and firewalls to provide a safe internet experience. The connectivity has offered students access to the Cisco Networking Academy and its certified teachers.

As part of that program, we created a scholarship program that recognizes the most talented students. It sends them to university, where they can further sharpen their IT skills and education.

Perhaps most exciting, I have now begun conversations with IT outsourcing companies, introducing them to the growing talent pool in Ghana. More than 20 students have found jobs this way.

Since their creation, the 11 training centers have served more than 20,000 young, energetic students.

In the process, they have confirmed that Ousman's treacherous journey served a great purpose. He has indeed improved living conditions in Ghana while helping others avoid the suffering that he endured.

This story doesn't end here. We have two exciting new projects we hope to share in the coming months.

It's crazy what a new iPad can help you create.

Ousman and Donald running to improve education in Africa.

Run to the Land of the White Man

To raise money for NASCO, Ousman created an annual fundraiser, Run to the Land of the White Man. This year, the virtual event seeks to honor the 21,333 kilometers Ousman traveled to reach what he believed to be paradise: The land of the white man.

For every kilometer that you run, walk, cycle, and swim, you are encouraged to make a donation. All proceeds support NASCO. And for every dollar that you raise, you can request a Cisco match in Bright Funds.

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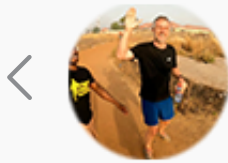
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MARIA JESUS PASTOR OMS

Thanks Ousman and Donald for this amazing project. What a wonderful succession of " apparent isolated" events that the Universe aligned to give birth to this amazing and life-changing initiative. How lucky are those students. Keep up this great work!

MAY 26 2021 02:57AM

Feeding Minds and Bridging Divides

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