



A student holds one of the radios donated to the Bigodi Parent's Primary Progressive School in Uganda while a teacher looks on. Ears To Our World's partner in the region, the Empower Campaign, is currently raising money to build Bigodi a new school, and their operation is doing great things.

Listen And Learn— Shortwave Radio Outreach Helps Teach Children

Non-profit *Ears To Our World* Distributes Self-Powered Shortwave Radios To Teachers In The Third World

by **Thomas Witherspoon, KF4TZK**

Imagine that you're a teacher in one of the most remote corners of the Earth, in a dimly lit hut. As you walked home from school earlier this evening you heard rumors that your country is on the brink of civil war. You can't be sure of this, as rumors abound, but you're concerned about it nonetheless: food is often scarce in your region, and a war will make it even harder to come by. You're worried about your pupils, some of whom have

Thomas Witherspoon, KF4TZK, is the Founder and Executive Director of Ears To Our World. He has been a shortwave radio listener since he was eight years old and passionately promotes the hobby. He is justly proud of the fact that one of the first words his twin daughters learned was "radio."

been recently orphaned by disease. If only you could determine whether the rumors are true. Or at least, read and prepare for tomorrow's classes. But there's no more gas in the lamp. Yet you are expected to get up at dawn—in just a few hours—and walk to a small school where nearly 60 pupils will crowd under the roof with knowledge-hungry eyes upon you, expecting you to teach them everything you know about the world they live in. But at the moment, what do you know?

As a teacher, you have some knowledge of literature, science, and math, but what of current events, politics, or world news? Such knowledge is easy to come by if you have access to libraries, the Internet, newspapers and journals, television, and local radio stations. What if your school not only has no

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Etón's Grundig FR200 shortwave receiver was chosen for the project because of its coverage range, rugged durability, and hand-crank power option. An important added bonus was its bright built-in flashlight.

library, but also has no walls? What if the nearest computer with Internet is more than a day's journey away? What if you actually do have a pocket radio, but the batteries to run it cost several days' wages? These are some of the daily challenges facing thousands upon thousands of teachers all over the world, tasked with the job of educating their countries' next generation of citizens.

Now imagine that we could just put into these teachers' hands, shortwave radios—self-powered radios, with LED reading lamps? Election results, local, regional, international news, as well as weather events and immunization programs are no longer unknowns with a radio. Even reading in the dark is suddenly possible. Imagine what it would be like for such a teacher to hear VOA or BBC news coming in clear and strong, dispelling rumors and myths and prejudices, and enlightening their young students about the world in which we live?

By providing resource-starved teachers direct access to a radio and basic knowledge about shortwave, Ears to Our World (ETOW) gives them a means to expand the often limited perspective of the children and young people they teach. In remote, impoverished, or war-torn regions, opportunities and futures are often written on the airwaves. Through radio, borders dissolve and impressionable minds soar. That's what ETOW is all about.

ETOW is a new grass-roots humanitarian organization specializing in the distribution of self-powered world band radios to teachers in the developing world, for the benefit of their students, schools, and communities.

An Idea Is Born

The idea behind ETOW began to evolve in 2008 after I became a father of premature twin daughters and quit my full-time job to care for them. One morning, as I held one of my swaddled daughters, I reached for a magazine and starting reading about an organization that worked in a rural school in

Building The Infrastructure For Ears To Our World

Ears to Our World is newly formed, but we are privileged to have established the following partnerships:

- *World Corps Kenya*—We partner with World Corps to serve rural schools throughout Kenya. We are currently working with Saint Catherine School in Kibera, Kenya (a pilot project), and have several other schools earmarked for radio distribution.

- *Friends of Kakamega*—Through the Friends of Kakamega, we are working with pilot groups of teachers who serve local children. Kakamega is located in Western Kenya.

- *Empower Campaign*—Through the Empower Campaign, we have recently sent radios to every teacher at Bigodi Parent's Primary Progressive School in Uganda. The Empower Campaign is currently building this new school, which previously had been constructed of nothing more than tin sheets and poles.

- *EduCare Africa*—We have managed to get a couple of radios into rural Cameroon via EduCare this year. We are currently working closely with EduCare representatives in Cameroon and the U.S., raising money to pay for logistical support and seeking assistance to send our radios to teachers throughout rural Cameroon. EduCare does not have the financial resources to pay for this project, but we believe we can have a strong impact there and so are seeking funding sources now.

- *American Haitian Foundation*—The AHF supports a large K–12 boarding school in Petite Rivière de Nippes. This facility is located in a very rural, isolated part of Haiti, but has developed into much more than just a school: it is also a local employer, a community center, and a hurricane shelter when required (a frequent need in Haiti). The AHF operates its school strictly off solar and renewable energy. It also runs three local radio transmitters that broadcast community information and weather advisories. ETOW is proud to have distributed radios, with AHF's assistance, to all 38 of its teachers, who may have access to power at school, but have none at home. We were able to get radios there in time for this year's hurricane season.

- *Books For Kids, Africa*—This new organization, based in Mozambique, will give radios to teachers who graduate from their teacher training program and move to remote parts of the country. ETOW's radios will allow them to keep up with current events in places where the Internet is still a thing of the future.

- *Project Education Sudan*—ETOW is very excited about this partnership. The country is war-torn and in a state of rebuilding. PES builds schools in an area of Southern Sudan so remote that resources often have to be flown in on chartered planes. The diverse programming available to these teachers, via shortwave radio, is nonetheless staggering and these teachers have much to gain from our radios. Our shipment, which will supply all four school's teachers with radios, will arrive in January of 2010.

Southeast Asia. The school originally had no electricity, hence, no lighting—but had solved the problem by installing a small solar panel on the roof of the school building and a simple LED lighting system inside. Teachers could then plug in basic DC devices, such as radios, to catch up on the news. I was filled with admiration for their resourcefulness. Here is a school, I thought, proud of the technology that we take for granted here in North America.

I wondered how useful it might be for teachers of that school to have access to power and information at home, too—perhaps where they spend the bulk of their time, and where they may do their class preparation? Specifically, I wondered how helpful it might be for these teachers to have access to a portable self-powered radio, with a built-in reading lamp? *Which radio?* I found myself wondering. *And how can I get one there?*

I couldn't stop thinking about it. What if I could send shortwave radios to other schools, too—to lots of teachers in schools without electricity throughout the world? Later that morning, I casually asked the question of my wife, who's often my sounding board. She looked at me, brows raised, and said "That is one of *the best* ideas you've ever had." We knew we were onto something. What, specifically, we didn't know, but *something*. With my wife's continued encouragement ("We may be poor for the rest of our lives, but what the heck, let's do it anyway")—and her suggestion of a name, Ears To Our World—I continued exploring the idea. But I'd need help.

I had recently been fortunate enough to meet a shortwave radio guru who I believed would have the answer. It was at this crucial point that I picked up the phone and called Fred Osterman, President of Universal Radio, Inc. Swallowing my hesitancy, I began to describe to Fred what I was considering doing; I explained that though I knew technology had advanced in this particular line of radio products, conditions in these regions would warrant a durable, reliable, time-tested device with good general coverage over the shortwave bands. Did he think there was such a product? More importantly, did he think my plan was nuts?

"Thomas," Fred said to me, "I think this is a *great* idea, and I would like to support you."

Instantly, I felt it was no longer just a pipe dream, that this could really happen. Fred offered some suggestions of self-



Serah Mucha (back row, wearing eyeglasses) of World Corps Kenya poses with staff members and the student class of the St. Catherine School, Kibera, Kenya.

powered radios that he thought might serve the purpose, and in short order had shipped to me several of the radios we'd discussed, noting that they were complimentary and that we could abuse them as we saw fit. I was grateful, and vowed to give them the full test. With the arrival of those radios, ETOW came into being.

Which Radio?

The choice of radio for our project was challenging. Each day, over a period of several months, we thoroughly tested the

array of radios Fred had sent, representing various manufacturers' products; we checked longevity of charge, radio sensitivity/selectivity on all bands, audio fidelity, ease of use, and ruggedness. Ultimately, a clear winner emerged: Etón's Grundig FR200. The FR200 had the features we sought: shortwave coverage down to 3.2 MHz to cover the tropics; FM and AM (mediumwave) coverage; an LED reading lamp; and a sturdy chassis. Plus, in our view, it offered the best sensitivity and selectivity of radios in its class. And, of course, it was self-



EduCare-Africa's Pavla Zakova-Laney (left) hands Ndomi Patrick Ndi (right), a teacher at G.S.S. Mbu-Warr in Cameroon, his school's first ETOW radio.

powered by hand crank—two minutes of cranking delivered approximately 40 to 60 minutes of radio listening at a reasonable volume.

One of the most significant deciding factors in our decision was the FR200's indications of longevity. We were impressed, moreover, with all of the Etón radios that we tested in this respect. Being able to supply not only a quality but also a *lasting* product to our classrooms and teachers made sense to me then, and is consistent with our current mission now, in that we endeavor to maintain the relationships we build with our schools, so these radios really must last. The FR200, we believed, could roll with the punches.

When we told Fred of our decision, he recommended that I contact his good friend Esmail Amid-Hozour, CEO of Etón Corporation. In the process of testing radios, I had investigated Etón Corporation and was thoroughly impressed with its mission—which, perhaps not so oddly, is very similar to our own. So, on Fred's advice, I wrote him a quick letter describing our plans, and asked for Etón's help. I'll admit, I was nervous about doing so, but need not have been; Mr. Hozour responded with enthu-

siasm and overwhelming support. Before I knew it, an enormous truck bearing two pallets filled with hundreds of FR200 radios arrived at my door.

I was gobsmacked. Here were two gentlemen who barely knew me, yet who put enough faith in this organization I had just formed to fuel it with thousands of dollars of their resources, asking nothing in return, and neither Fred nor Esmail ever *hinted* that they should receive even recognition. Their incredible injection of support powered the formation of our board of directors and our incorporation of this non-profit that I now direct.

ETOW's First Steps

Meanwhile, I had created a website and we were beginning to receive requests to partner with organizations serving various parts of the world. We quickly realized that we needed specific criteria to define where our resources should go, and we kept it simple: Ears To Our World, we determined, will work in *any* region of the world where electricity and Internet access are severely limited or non-existent in schools or for teachers and their students. This meant very rural, sometimes

politically charged or war-torn areas of the world, where the inhabitants often live on less than \$1 U.S. per day.

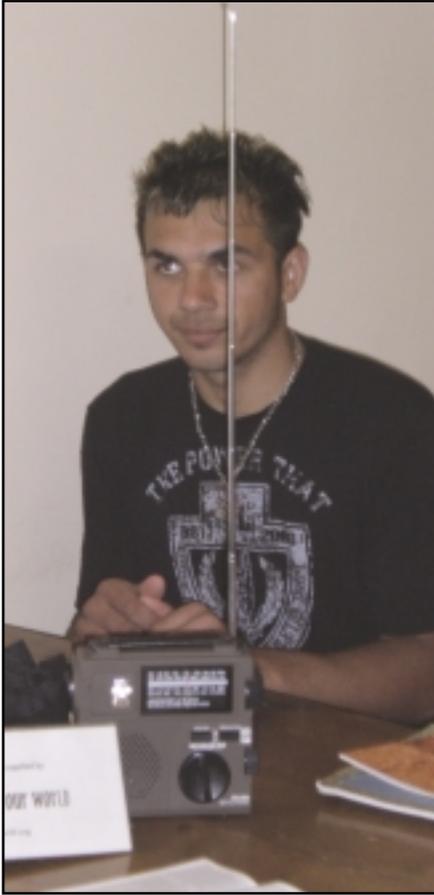
Knowing that I would need help getting this project off the ground, I enlisted the expertise of some people I already knew—several of whom now serve on ETOW's board of directors. One such individual, who became an instant friend—Dr. Nyaga Mwaniki, Professor of Anthropology at Western Carolina University—put me in touch with Serah Mucha of World Corps Kenya. I quickly made contact with Serah, and as luck would have it, shortly thereafter Dr. Mwaniki's professional research led him to Kenya for six months. Thus, he was personally able to deliver a radio to Serah at World Corps, who in turn placed it in the hands of a deserving teacher in a pilot Kenyan school.

I received this communication from Ms. Mucha shortly afterwards:

Hallo Thomas,

Hope today was good for you...

The school [where the radio was placed] is situated in Kibera, which is the biggest slum in Africa; it has 145 children and only 5 teachers, so this radio could be counted as the sixth. The buildings are dilapidated but what caught



ETOW partners with the Pleasant Ridge Church in Morganton, North Carolina, which sponsors a school in Hirip, Romania, that educates local Gypsy children. These children do not have access to electricity (or running water) at home, or at the school. Here, a student named Levi is shown using the radio as an aid in learning current events and English.

me was the eagerness for the children to learn and the excitement of a new method of learning in the classroom...

Thanks; it was so wonderful to give the radio away and see the smiles...

Regards

Serah Mucha

I shared this wonderful missive with my mentor Fred Osterman, who had already donated enough radios for several pilot schools' teachers. ETOW was officially up and running.

Power Through Partnership

From our inception, ETOW set about building strong partnerships with other reputable established non-profit agencies that *already* help struggling schools throughout the world—and who believe, as we do, in free access to information.



American Haitian Foundation Board Member Emmanuel "Manolo" Eressoir, explains radio distribution to teachers at their school in Petite Rivière de Nippes. Radios are shown in their protective carrying cases.

This was an important move. By the very nature of the remote regions we serve, extending our assistance demands persistence, financial resources, and logistical support. And often a lot of patience. Shipping radios to other countries usually involves detailed arrangements with national and regional governmental authorities (for example, to waive duties or taxes); once the radios arrive, distributing them to these remote areas can also be very costly and complex. Our existing partner organizations have often laid the groundwork in these regions, and have established reliable connections with communities in them. Their need is for resources—like radios.

By working cooperatively with other established organizations, we find we're able to distribute radios much more cost-effectively, too. In other words, we operate on a shoestring budget so that donations to ETOW are used wisely and to their fullest extent. For example, because of our strong partnerships, money otherwise spent on travel can be put into shipping costs instead, thus getting more radios to more areas of the world with less donated funds. Though I'm reluctant to admit it (as I love to travel), this is a better use of our resources. Our established partners can help us get the radios there faster, more safely, and more strategically than we could manage as a new organization.

But our partners are never just a means to an end. These hard-working organiza-

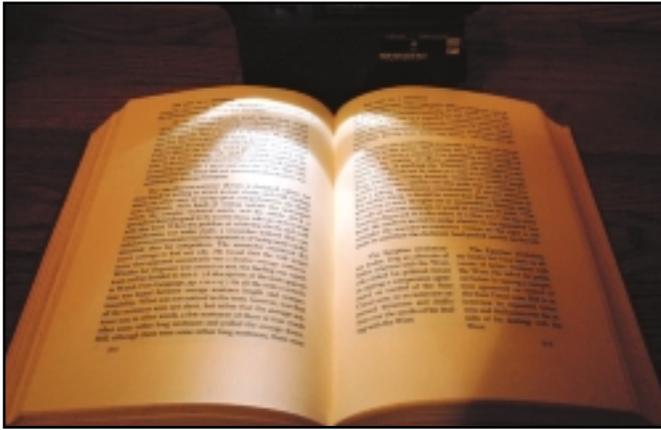
tions center around incredible, inspiring people, whom I've been privileged to get to know. These leaders, activists, and compassionate visionaries have taught me a great deal, and I'm grateful that we're able to work synergistically with them on a regular basis.

Where We Are Now

Since our inception in February 2009, we have placed radios in schools in Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Caribbean; so far, our scope is limited only by our financial resources.

Currently, we are working in Kenya, Uganda, Cameroon, Romania, and Haiti. By the time of this article's publication, we will have also sent radios to Mozambique and started others on their way to a very remote region of Sudan. But unlike some other aid organizations, rather than simply focusing on expansion, ETOW is establishing strong, lasting bonds with our schools and teachers so as to better serve their needs long term.

What can ETOW expect in the months and years to follow? We're not sure, but we know this: While there are many worthy non-profit and non-governmental organizations working all over the world today, providing food, shelter, medicine, and other necessities, ETOW wants to feed the *mind* through the use of short-wave radio. We believe this to be an equally great need, because feeding the mind, we believe, offers hope for the future. So



Another tremendously useful feature of the FR200 is its built-in LED that's bright enough to read by. With the turning of a hand crank, it can illuminate text books in remote regions that may never have received electrification. It's also better for the environment than burning kerosene or wood for a light source.

we will continue distributing radios for as long as we can, repairing and replacing broken ones, and listening to the feedback we receive from teachers and students.

Listen and learn. It's a simple idea, but to some young people, it can mean the world. We'll do it, too.

ETOW's Lessons

The whole process of forming and promoting ETOW has taught me two things.

The first is that the radio listening community is cohesive, supportive, and incredibly active—from SWLers to broadcasters, manufacturers, and retailers, we are all connected by a shared passion for a remarkable technology. Based on the incredible moral and financial support we received just at this year's Winter SWL Festival, sponsored by the North American Shortwave Association and held each year in Kulpsville, Pennsylvania (see "Come One, Come All," *Pop'Comm*, February 2009), I realized the radio community can truly make a difference to causes like ETOW's. At the Winterfest, we attracted support from skilled radio enthusiasts like Greg Majewski (see his article elsewhere in this issue), as well as many others who have been helping us both financially and through networking with media broadcasters and organizations in other countries. The outpouring of support has been both humbling and inspiring.

How You Can Help

In the western world, we often take our access to information for granted. In the countries where ETOW works, the people *don't* take it for granted. Indeed, in these areas, information is truly power. A shortwave radio empowers children and their teachers to receive educational support programming, local and international news, emergency information, and music. It's power that broadens minds and creates futures. This year, please join us in giving the gift of radio to those who need it most.

Contributions (in any amount) may be sent to EARS TO OUR WORLD, P.O. BOX 3230, CULLOWHEE, NC 28723, USA or made online at <http://earstoourworld.org>.

The second thing has to do with the talk about the decline of shortwave. I suppose that I, too, once believed that this technology was endangered. *No longer.* Nor is it just devoted hobbyists who keep it on life support; shortwave radio is vital and very much alive in places that we scarcely knew existed. Doubt me? Just ask any of our teacher partners, or their students—they listen and learn via shortwave, each and every day. Following is a note we recently received that sums up this vivid lesson:

TO EARS TO OUR WORLD

Dear Friends,

I received with great joy the radio donated to me by you. This radio is going to help me, my students, the staff and the entire community...

I hope...many students will work very hard to become teachers in order to receive such a [radio].

I thank you very much for the concern you have [for] us by donating this radio, which is a most precious gift.

Yours,
Ndomi Patrick Ndi
GSS Mbu-Warr
Cameroon

I would like to end on a personal note, saying that none of this would be possible without my sponsors, my partners, my board, my mentors, my friends, and my family. Thank you all.