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# Using computers to improve lives

### Project that empowers women in low income communities on health education scoops international competition

A digital communication project that empowers previously disadvantaged women to create their own maternal health educational content, then share it among one another has won a University of Cape Town (UCT) academic and her international peers the prestigious National Academies Keck Futures Initiative (NAKFI) Challenge grant.

The researchers came up with the idea of empowering mothers in low-literacy and low-income communities to share healthcare information among themselves through a locally-available digital channel, which they named Digital Street Theatre (DST).

Dr Melissa Densmore, senior lecturer and Information and Communications Technologies for Development (ICT4D) staff member, and three other researchers from across the globe will be using these funds to address maternal and child health issues through a digital communication project.

For the past few years, much of Densmore's work has focused on providing computer-based support for healthcare and development in previously disadvantaged communities around Cape Town. She has been specifically interested in creating mobile health solutions that can serve as a complementary resource to overstretched local clinics.

She said after her master's degree she wanted to use her computing skills to help people and to address issues of global poverty, malnutrition, health, and other social problems.

"I was working in the start-up environment back in the United States and just didn't find it really fulfilling to work on projects that were helping people who already have money to make even more money," she says.

Densmore found herself networking with academics and researchers from across the globe who shared her passion for using computer science to improve lives. Eventually, she joined forces with Kentaro Toyama and Mustafa Naseem from the University of Michigan School of Information, as well as Agha Ali Raza from the Information Technology University in Lahore, Pakistan, to work on a project to address the rising rates of maternal and child death around the world.

They recognised the fact that causes differ by country, but that the health knowledge and habits of mothers play a key role in reducing mortality. Mortality rates also tend to be highest among low-literacy families; those who most need health education are least equipped to absorb it from mainstream sources.

As she points out, mothers love giving advice to other mothers about what they should and shouldn't do with their children. Of course, this isn't always well received in person. In many cases, women turn to online communities, or technology, to find answers to their most pressing parenting questions.

Densmore said the DST project is based on the idea that "people have, historically, always communicated through stories. So, when you see a story coming from one of your peers, it's much more convincing than, say, a story coming from a government official or a textbook".

Her group entered their proposal into the NAFKI Challenge. It was one of 78 applications from around the world. DST was chosen as one of the three winning projects.

Densmore will be kicking off her DST research in Ocean View, a community on the outskirts of Kommetjie in Cape Town, where another recent ICT4D project could offer a good basis from which to start.

Residents will be able to share their music, videos, news and learning materials for free within the community. They'll also be able to connect with each other through a chat service like WhatsApp. Access to the internet will be offered in time, at a much cheaper rate than current options.

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