Well of Dreams
by Dan Frantz
I was in Angiro, Kenya, filming a documentary about how one woman, Anne Okelo, had overcome great obstacles in order to bring about a better life for herself and her fellow villagers. That experience, in the summer of 2011, was worlds away from my early attempts at filmmaking.

I was nine when some friends and I decided to make “movies” using a tape camcorder. We shot scenes of small militias of G.I. Joes toting tiny toy guns that smashed against each other in a blur of feverish hands, plastic, and high-pitched voice-overs. When the waxy-complexioned G.I. Joes no longer sufficed in terms of acting ability, we became the actors. And as the years progressed, both my equipment and my filmmaking ability improved.

Opportunity of a Lifetime
At 16, I had a minimum-wage job at a local food mart. On payday, I would cash my paycheck and put the money into my movies. Although seven years had passed since I’d shot those war scenes using G.I. Joes, I was still making action films—only now they were bigger and better. Around Halloween that year, I made a zombie film starring a bunch of my friends. Cindy Speaker, the aunt of one of the kids in the film, happened to own a production company, and when I posted the video and tagged my friend in it on Facebook, Cindy saw it. She invited me for an interview and offered me a job as a visual effects technician. While the company specialized in marketing videos for law firms, Cindy recognized and encouraged my interest in filmmaking.

She had always had a passion for documentary filmmaking, and was traveling to a remote part of Africa to shoot intensively for 10 days. She presented me with the opportunity of a lifetime when she invited me to join her.

We would be accompanied by two others: Warren Calloway, a hospital CEO who had visited Kenya and knew both the terrain and the subject of the film, would act as our guide. Chris Mercury was my co-worker and a graduate of the film program at Drexel University. Together, Chris and I would shoot the footage, and Cindy would both direct and produce the film.

Anne’s Story
In much of Africa, left-handed people are perceived as weak. A left-handed woman, it is believed, is a bad omen who will bring an untimely death to her husband and children. Because Anne was left-handed, her mother and nine siblings attempted to beat the left-handedness out of her: Whenever she cooked with her left hand or used it to work the fields, she would be beaten. When she tried to use her right hand instead, the quality of her work, writing, and cooking suffered, and again, she was beaten. Anne, along with other members of her village, also experienced frequent bouts of malaria, leaving them bedridden for weeks at a time.

Our challenge was to convey Anne’s story—her dreams, struggles, and eventual triumphs—through the medium of film. When I stepped onto the plane, I had no idea what I was getting into.
Tuberculosis and diarrheal disease were constant threats, the latter due to a lack of clean drinking water. Anne was determined to live a better life, though.

When she was 14—the age at which Kenyan girls typically enter into marriage—Anne ran away from home and sold candles on the side of the road. After working many odd jobs, she eventually earned a degree in environmental studies from the University of Nairobi. Then, in 2003, Anne answered an Internet ad for a conservation job in the U.S. with the British Petroleum Corporation. Anne was going to America!

Through B.P., Anne trained, worked, and received mentoring. Several years later, Anne was working on her master’s degree at West Chester University in Pennsylvania when she learned that, because of a political uprising in Kenya, she was about to lose her sponsorship to the university—meaning that she would have to return to Kenya. As Anne grappled with this information, a university administrator approached her. A man named Warren Calloway had contacted the university. Calloway had recently visited Kenya as part of a church group and returned to the U.S. determined to help those less fortunate. He was looking for a student from Kenya to mentor. Did they know of anyone who could use his help?

In addition to paying Anne’s expenses in the U.S., Warren helped Anne create Operation Well Worth It, a website where people could donate money to help build a well in Angiro. Anne spoke at local church groups and community organizations, telling her story and requesting donations. She raised over $30,000, and in 2010, after receiving her master’s degree in nonprofit administration, returned to Kenya, where the well was built.

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Getting Real

When we began shooting, I still had the mindset of an action filmmaker. I wanted “cool” shots, those with the highest production value. Rather than seeing a story of infinite potential against the backdrop of the overwhelming beauty of Africa, I was monitoring ISO and aperture through my viewfinder. As a result, I remained distanced from the story we were trying to tell—until we began shooting interviews.

As Anne’s sister recounted how her husband regularly beat her with a machete, and Anne—now 34—explained how, despite the abuse she herself endured, she was able to maintain her dream of bringing clean water to her community, the reality of their lives began to dawn on me. This wasn’t some story I’d scripted and shot for fun. I was meeting the true characters in this real-life story of hardship and courage. I became emotionally connected not only to the film, but to the people the film was about. It became my privilege to help Anne’s story inspire others.

The rest of that week was one of the best times of my life. Each day, Chris and I filmed as Cindy conducted interviews with Anne and her family members, as well as with Warren, Anne’s secondary school principal, two mentors who had helped her sell candles, and people from the village whom Anne had inspired. When we weren’t doing interviews, we shot footage of the village and its people in their day-to-day lives. Despite many cultural differences, we were welcomed into
the community. We ate meals with the villagers, danced and sang, played, laughed, and cried with them. For those few days, we were a part of their world. When the week came to a close, my new challenge was to take all that I'd experienced home with me.

**Bringing It Home**

Once stateside, I was charged with cutting a sizzle reel, a short trailer of the film, that would be sent to HBO, PBS, OWN, and other networks in an attempt to spark interest in it. Over the next two weeks, I distilled over 200 hours of footage into a seven-minute trailer. I planned, drafted, cut, and reworked it until I finally had something that came close to summarizing what I'd learned during those 10 days in Angiro.

We showed the trailer to a group of around 100 friends and family members of Anne and my boss. It was an incredible feeling to watch a live audience react to something I'd not only created, but also experienced firsthand. Some people broke down in tears, while others came away with their spirits lifted. A few asked what they could do to help. I began to appreciate film's power as a catalyst for change.

Buoyed by the response to the trailer, we set to work on the film. Over a span of thousands of hours, Cindy, Chris, Warren, and I turned the footage into a feature-length documentary. *Well of Dreams* was screened at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, in August, and the sizzle reel ran for a month at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Reaction to the film has been encouraging, and people seem genuinely moved by Anne's story. We are currently looking for a distributor for the film.

**Working for Change**

Today, Anne works for an environmental company whose goal is to improve the lives of people in Kenya. She successfully urged her employer to donate several of the company's environmentally efficient toilets, which convert waste to fertilizer, to local villages.

Anne is now treated like a queen by some, and perceived as a threat by others. It is rare for a woman to refuse the traditional role of women in Kenya. Local and regional political authorities—as well as some of Anne's own family members—fear that she will become involved in Kenyan politics, thereby empowering women and changing the life they know. As a result, it is no longer safe for her to live in the village. Instead, Anne lives and works about two hours away, but she continues to travel to the village on weekends to mentor women there.

Through a social networking campaign, Warren, Cindy, Chris, and I raised several thousand dollars to provide sanitary napkins for the young women in Anne's village, who had previously been unable to attend school for an entire week each month. A group of schoolchildren from my community donated 52 soccer balls to children in Kenya who had been using rolled up paper bound with tape.

As for me, I'm still amazed that something I helped create could inspire people to donate time and money to help someone a world away. I think that when you do that—when you create something that makes people want to work for change—that's when you know you've fulfilled your role as an artist.

Dan Frantz, a freshman at the Savannah College of Art and Design, was named a 2012 Presidential Scholar in the Arts for his work on *Well of Dreams*. In addition to filmmaking, Dan enjoys photography, downhill longboarding, snowboarding, badminton, and Airsoft.