

TED titans see through eyes of young innovators

February 29 2012, by Glenn Chapman



Filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, winner of the Oscar for Best Documentary Short for *Saving Face*, in the press room at the Academy Awards on February 26. She is a senior fellow of TED, the technology nonprofit whose conference formally got under way in California on Tuesday.

Titans of Silicon Valley, Hollywood, and finance gazed through the eyes of young innovators as the renowned TED conference formally got under way on Tuesday.

TED [fellows](#) are welcomed into the fold at the technology-focused conference to mix fresh, promising ideas with an elite roster of attendees renowned for turning dreams into successes.

They range this year from an entrepreneur fighting [deforestation](#) in

Uganda to an [inventor](#) of kits that make child's play of electronics to do-it-yourself neuroscience and an aspiring China law expert turned banjo star.

Renowned scientists, [political leaders](#), artists, entrepreneurs and musicians take to the stage at the TED [gatherings](#) where they are urged to give the "talk of their lives" in 18 minutes.

"I think that the people who go to TED are probably the most innovative people in the world," said TED fellow Michael Karnjanaprakorn, co-founder of startup Skillshare.

"This fellowship program is putting people with crazy ideas in a room with people who can help them realize their ideas," Karnjanaprakorn said.

Skillshare.com was launched last year as a website that turns "every city into a college campus and every person becomes a teacher," he said.

Karnjanaprakorn described Skillshare as a marketplace where people with skills or knowledge can connect with those interesting in learning from them in whatever real-world settings are available.

"We want to bring back the way learning was supposed to be," he said.

Anyone with a passion to teach on a topic can go online to [skillshare.com](#) and post a time, place, and price for their class.

Course prices range from free to thousands of dollars, with Skillshare getting about 15 percent of each ticket sold.

More than 6,000 students have attended Skillshare classes since the website launched in New York City in April.

The idea for Skillshare came to Karnjanaprakorn after he competed in the World Series of Poker to raise money for a New Orleans school struggling to recover in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

The amateur player coaxed poker experts into coaching him. When he returned from the competition in Las Vegas, so many friends pleaded with him to teach them poker skills that it led to the creation of Skillshare.

"I taught my first and last poker class," said Karnjanaprakorn, who conceded that he didn't do well in the series but had hedged his bets by getting his card-savvy mentors to donate portions of their winnings.

"Now I teach a class on entrepreneurship."

The array of TED fellows includes the inventor of a "Thing-o-matic" that prints three-dimensional objects, a scientist behind a lab where anyone can play biologist, artists and shadow puppeteers.

"No one really knows how the brain works, and that's a shame," said TED fellow and neuroscientist Greg Gage, who came up with kits that young students can use to experiment on insects to learn how neurons function.

TED fellow and biotechnician Oliver Medvedik co-founded Genspace, a space in New York City where amateurs can collaborate on experiments such as genetic research.

Fellow Sanga Moses figured out a way to convert farm waste inexpensively into charcoal for cooking in a bid to stop rampant deforestation in his homeland of Uganda, and invests the proceeds to replant trees.

Mechanical engineer and TED fellow Alex Odira Odundo of Kenya built a machine that lets poor farmers make money by converting easily grown sisal plant fiber into saleable rope.

Senior TED fellow Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy was vaunted into celebrity right before the start of the conference, having been awarded an Oscar for best short documentary at the Academy Awards for "Saving Face," a film about survivors of acid attacks.

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