DStv Eutelsat Award's Botswana winner sets Africa's sights on space

It's 12:00pm on a Wednesday afternoon and the skies over Kenya are crisp and clear. The Bateleur Super Heavy is ready for take-off. In 10, 9, 8…." Seconds later the rocket blasts off, arcing east over the great Congo River basin, breaking the sound barrier. The launch heralds another successful rocket launch from African soil.

This is the future envisioned by Tanaka Chonyera, the inspiring 19-year-old aerospace dynamo from Gaborone, Botswana, who last month returned from a once-in-a-lifetime trip to French Guiana to watch a rocket blast into space to place a satellite into orbit.

Tanaka was the standout winner in the essay category of the 2018 DStv Eutelsat Star Awards. A partnership between Eutelsat and MultiChoice Africa, the recently discontinued Star Awards aimed to stimulate interest in science and technology as well as to inspire innovative thinking among secondary and high school students, enriching young lives across the continent.

Tanaka's essay which was a response to the Star Awards' question on how humans can utilize satellites in a more efficient and useful way, proposed using satellites as refuelling stations, as electromagnetic inductors, or as giant solar farms beaming energy back to earth saving the finite land we have available. In Tanaka's essay he displayed an extremely in-depth understanding of the world of satellites and more importantly, a passion for not only astronomy but for providing solutions which will benefit the human race.

As the category winner, Tanaka was whisked off to Paris for, among others, a tour of the Eiffel Tower, still considered one of the greatest engineering feats of our time, followed by a visit to French Guiana for a live rocket launch.

"Seeing a 60m tall rocket launch is mind-blowing. It's like staring into the sun. It's quiet for 5 to 10 seconds, then you hear this thunderous roar, then everything starts shaking and you feel the vibrations in your body even though the launch pad is 5km away. I can't even describe it. These are the most powerful vehicles humanity has ever built, and to see one launch is truly life changing," Tanaka gushes, recounting his trip that marked the culmination of the eighth and final edition of MultiChoice's DStv Eutelsat Star Awards.

More than just a sight-seeing adventure, Tanaka rubbed shoulders with visionary thinkers who, like him, want to change the world, starting with Africa. From CEOs with aspirations to revolutionise African internet connectivity, to rocket scientists who engaged the budding aerodynamicist over technical subjects such as electrical

compulsion and the challenge of managing space debris, Tanaka peered through the wormhole at his future…and is completely hooked.

“I have loved rocketry my whole life. It’s the classic story of the kid who breaks things down just to build them up again. At eight years old, I tried to make a rocket out of baking soda and vinegar. It blew up in my face, but ignited my lifelong obsession with rockets and space. By nine years old I was reading my sister’s physics books, and by 10 I had conceptualised the name of my aerospace agency, complete with its own logo, and decided which subsidiary companies I would launch under this umbrella venture to fund an aerospace programme for Africa.

“I have since launched all these companies, and following this trip to Paris, am more dedicated than ever before to pioneering a space revolution in Africa. Yes, we make satellites here on the continent, but we don’t make rockets and we don’t launch them. There are plenty of excellent destinations from which to launch rockets, like Kenya, which is on the equator so you get the speed boost of the earth’s rotation, and has plenty of useable land. There is no reason why we as Africans shouldn’t be doing this ourselves. The resources are there, the expertise are there. It just needs one person to bring it all together. I plan to be that person. I am going to pioneer spaceship building and rocket launches from Africa,” Tanaka says seriously, acknowledging that there are not enough positive African role models in science and technology.

This is fuelling his drive to additionally position himself as a source of inspiration for his generation in science and tech innovation in Africa, for he is equally passionate about the untapped potential of Africa and Africans.

He wants to inspire Africans to be proudly African and to reach for the stars knowing that they can be anything they want to be. As a continent, we no longer need external validation or others’ leads to follow. We can, and should, carve our own paths.

“I have a vision to build cutting-edge research facilities in Africa, like our own particle accelerator, and to start my own non-profit preschool, primary school, high school and university that encourage free thinking and questioning the status quo of everything we think we know. I also want to open a technology centre for Africa’s brightest minds to stretch the limits of their innovative and creative thinking, and bring to life those ideas that only exist in their heads. So many people have great ideas to help society but there is no funding. I want to secure that funding to encourage innovation among young Africans because honestly, I think amazing work will come out of that,” he says, emphasising the incredible potential that exists for greater self-sufficiency in Africa, especially in the area of renewable resources.

Not even the sky is the limit for this ambitious Maru-a-Pula High School high school graduate. He is about to embark on his university studies in aerospace engineering, which he will complete while running his existing telecoms and solar power businesses to raise funds for his African space agency dream.

Winning the DStv Eutelsat Star Awards has cemented Tanaka’s path and the visionary change he will bring to Africa, reflecting MultiChoice Africa’s objective of using science and technology to enrich African lives.

“This was a once-in-a-lifetime shot, especially being the last edition of the awards,” Tanaka says. “It has literally changed my life. I know now for a fact, anything is possible. I’m going to achieve every single one of my goals. It’s going to be an exciting journey, one which has already started thanks to MultiChoice Africa and Eutelsat.”

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