

Wireless warrior

Written by Mandy De Waal
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Henk Kleynhans` dream is to blanket Africa with the cheapest, fastest and most stable internet access possible.

Within two years of founding Skyrove, wireless hotspots have mushroomed locally, and the company is entering Angola, Mozambique and Botswana. Let's hope Henk Kleynhans' ambition is realised.

Kleynhans must have known he was destined for something big. At the age of five, he was dreaming of hurtling through outer space and had his mind set on being an astronaut. There's something about that dream that speaks to the man's journey, pioneering the unknown and going where others have yet to tread.

Says Kleynhans: "I've had lots of different dreams since then, but they're always focused on building things while having exciting new adventures. What's important to me is that I want to leave a legacy and have loads of fun while doing it."

A maverick who believes technology should be used to level playing fields and that the internet is the world's biggest democratising force, Kleynhans' dreams materialised into a business called Skyrove. Built on a model of enabling people to create DIY hotspots and then make money from them, simplicity is Skyrove's *raison d'être*.

Setting up a hotspot is as easy as getting the box, plugging in the wireless mesh router, and registering to pay as you go. The best part about it is that you can become a reseller and get your friends, family or customers to fund the hotspot so that you pay nothing, and get something extra in your pocket each month.

AGGRESSIVE EXPANSION

"As a student at UCT, I couldn't afford to get my own ADSL line. I realised that if I could share a connection with my mates in digs and neighbours, I could easily pay for the connection,

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and perhaps even make a profit. In those days, WiFi service providers charged people for the time spent online, which was a problem, as one person could be streaming video all day, using up the data allocation on the account, while slowing down the experience for others. I needed a way to charge people for the megabytes they used, not the time spent online. A solution like that simply didn't exist. So I built it."

When Skyrove launched in 2006, it was the first WiFi service provider worldwide to offer a prepaid, per megabyte wireless service. Today, there are about 540 hotspots around the country in bookstores, flats, coffee shops, new apartment complexes and university digs. The model has proved so popular that the company is on an aggressive expansion and Skyrovers, as users are called, will soon be setting up hotspots in neighbouring countries. Locally, the business has grown ten-fold just this year.

"South Africa missed out on the dotcom boom in the 1990s due to the lack of broadband," says Kleynhans. "While there was a frantic race to install infrastructure worldwide, we missed the boat entirely. One should keep in mind that there was an over-investment in infrastructure in the US in anticipation of continued high growth. And that's the reason you can get uncapped broadband for as little as \$20 a month."

DREAM A LITTLE

What does Kleynhans dream about today? The notion of being an astronaut's gone, but the dream still speaks to the sky being the limit. "Business has the power to change the world, and it's ultimately through business, not politics, that most visionary leaders will leave a lasting impact. My dream is to see community-owned wireless hotspots blanketing all of Africa. WiFi offers the cheapest, fastest and most stable connectivity. The only reason it's not being pushed more strongly by telcos is because of its open nature. You can't lock people in with a SIM card or phone number."

It's a good thing for Africa that Nasa never found this man.