

ALUMNI PROFILE

Jambo! Jambo! Jambo!

Two NOLS Grads Make Connections Their Business



NOLS Kenya grads Jim Young and Charles Ribaldo, shown on their '93 semester, are co-founders of the new wireless networking company "Jambo" (Swahili for "hello").

BY AMY RATHKE

Imagine you're sitting in a coffee shop while traveling, trying to decide the best place to stay for the night. Suddenly, your cellular phone alerts you that another NOLS graduate has just entered the coffee shop. In striking up a conversation, you learn that this fellow grad is a local and they know all about great campsites and hiking in the area.

The software that allows this kind of "electronic introduction" is exactly what NOLS grads Jim Young and Charles Ribaldo have dreamed up. Young and Ribaldo, both graduates of the same Semester in Kenya in 1993, reconnected in 1993, ten years after they completed their NOLS semester. "We had developed a great friendship at NOLS – when you spend 65 days together, you get pretty close," says Ribaldo.

The NOLS grads have worked together to create a company called Jambo, (www.jambo.net), a form of electronic personal networking based on the premise of face-to-face meetings.

A chance reunion in Dallas inspired this promising young company. Ribaldo, who was working for a venture capital fund at the time, was in a meeting with a local start-up when he met Young's father, Jim Young, Sr. After the meeting, Ribaldo approached him and asked if he happened to have a son by the same name who had taken a NOLS course in Kenya. Young, Sr. said that he did, and the rest is history.

"That night I got an e-mail from Jim," explains Ribaldo. "And we got back in touch with each another." Even though they hadn't talked in 10 years, the two grads discovered they still had a lot in common. "When we started catching up, we realized that we had very complementary skills for starting a business," Ribaldo says.

The young entrepreneurs saw potential in their chance reconnection. Had Young, Sr. had a different first name, or had Ribaldo forgotten that Young was originally from Dallas, he may never have bothered to ask about his former course mate.

"Really, what's driving us is that there are thousands of these missed opportunities," says Young. "There are so many instances where that extra information isn't available. The problem we're trying to address is that lack of information about people around you."

Inspired by the language they picked up while in Kenya, the two decided to name the company Jambo, which is the Swahili word for "hello."

Essentially, Jambo enables people to see their otherwise "invisible" connections to each other through the use of WiFi devices like cell phones, laptops, and PDAs. It's kind of like wearing a NOLS t-shirt all the time.

The way it works is similar to other online networks like MySpace or Friendster, with a couple of key differences. "Online networks take place exclusively online," explains Young. "The person you're connected with could be around the corner or around the world. What we're doing is we're intentionally limiting the people you can see to the people that are within walking distance, that are accessible face to face."

These connections can be useful for everything from finding a climbing partner to creating business contacts. Jambo saw success recently in Florida at the StarEAST Conference for software testers, when two gentlemen arrived at the hotel the night before the conference. They were sitting in their rooms, separated by three floors, checking their e-mail. Suddenly, the Jambo software on their laptops alerted them that someone else nearby was going to be attending the conference.

"They started chatting, then said, 'You know what? Let's meet downstairs and grab a beer.' They met down in the lobby and pretty much hung out together throughout the next three days," says Young. "I couldn't have asked for a more perfect model experience."

Jambo is also different from typical online networks in that already-established groups, like alumni associations or business conferences, can register for the service. According to Young, this creates a more legitimate basis for people who want to meet in person, than, say, sharing a common interest in a certain band or an author. He says NOLS is a great example of a group that people would use to find other grads nearby.

"NOLS is probably my strongest group connection," says Young, who also took an Alaska Mountaineering course in 1992. "I feel closer to NOLS than I feel to my university." Young and Ribaldo are working with NOLS' Marketing Department to develop a custom

profile and define how best to connect NOLS alumni with Jambo.

Much like their Semester in Kenya, the two NOLS grads are making sure they enjoy the process of working together on Jambo. "We're making it fun and exciting as we go," said Ribaldo. "It's the journey that matters, not the end goal. We're having the best time starting this company."

Essentially, Jambo enables people to see their otherwise "invisible" connections to each other through the use of WiFi devices like cell phones, laptops, and PDAs.