



“My advice to funders is to invest more in the people you have created, and the values you believe in.”

A Conversation with Gerald Abila of [BarefootLaw](#)

Carly Lanning

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Carly Lanning: Please tell me the story of your venture, when was it founded and why? What communities do you serve?

Gerald Abila: My name is Gerald Abila. I'm a lawyer and the founder of BarefootLaw, based in Uganda. BarefootLaw was founded 12 years ago after noticing there was a significant challenge facing people in accessing the law. The statistics, when we founded BarefootLaw, were that about 90% of Ugandan lawyers were based in the capital city Kampala, so about 3,000 lawyers for a population of 45 million.

About 10 years ago, technology was starting to boom. Right now, about half of the population has access to internet connectivity. When we started, about 3% to 5% had access to the internet. We looked at that as an opportunity, because it was rising fast, to come up with a way in which people can access legal services for free, especially across the country with a specific focus on areas that are hard to reach, and women.

That's how BarefootLaw started, with an SMS platform and a Facebook page. We've since then grown to be the institution we are today. We've served over 1,100,000 people across the country since we started, with the majority of these having legal issues around land, family, and basic issues that are economic in nature.

The model is simple. We simplify the law and broadcast it, and people with questions get in touch with us. Those questions come to a central database, and our team of trained lawyers provide one-on-one advice to them until the problem is resolved. We leverage technology tools from the most basic, like radio stations, and community partners who have gadgets we've given them for more complicated internal tools such as AI that supports work on our dashboard.

The growth has been incredible, but I wouldn't say we had a plan. We saw a problem and then tried to figure it out. It's only with hindsight that you see how the model has evolved. You don't start it by saying, "This is a problem we're going to solve and we're going to use technology." You just use whatever you have to overcome a challenge.

Now, with all the support, training, and data we've gotten, we're able to have something solid with the BarefootLaw model we use. Probably about six years ago is when things

started becoming more serious and solid. Before that, it was more figuring out and starting to realize the SMS doesn't work. You go for this and that, put it together, and then start trying to scale what you've figured out.

Carly Lanning: What was that moment six years ago that changed your direction?

Gerald Abila: I wouldn't say it was one moment. It was the need, but also the external belief in our work. You start off as a lawyer, trying to make money because that's what we're trained for at law school. We're not trained to do a lot of our work pro bono. When you start doing a different path, you start seeing things that you were never taught in law school. Each of us at BarefootLaw has one case that probably switched their mindset.

For me, that moment of transformation probably started in 2013 or 2014, and gradually built until I realized that this is something impactful to dedicate the rest of my life to. It wasn't one moment. It was a collection of observations, especially on the impact the work had on those we serve. That then brought external valuation. When external people started liking the model, it came with some validation and we started taking things a bit seriously. Otherwise, why would anyone pay attention to something like this if it wasn't having an impact? A lot of newspapers, publications, and the partners we got along the way supported and invested in us.

Carly Lanning: Will you share some impactful stories of people who have been positively impacted by BarefootLaw?

Gerald Abila: There are several, but for me, there was a guy back when I started BarefootLaw as a student in my final year at law school. I got myself a desk, a room, and a telephone. Initially, I had an old iPhone 3G that was given to me as a gift, and that's what I used to start the SMS service and the Facebook page, and then someone contacted me on Facebook. He sent a message from somewhere really upcountry, about five or six hours from the capital city, Kampala, towards the border with Kenya, in a place called Soroti.

This guy was at the last funeral rites, and it seems he was being denied his inheritance. When someone passes on, mourners pray at the last funeral rites and distribute property. I sent him our phone number, and he called. I was able to advise him over a few weeks on what to do, what letter to write, where to go. I didn't hear from him for about three months, and then he wrote back to say he was able to resolve the problem. He got himself a piece of land as part of his inheritance. That's when he sent some shoes, recycled sandals made of old tires. The message was, "You should not be barefoot again." That, for me, was very important, because it showed me the potential for my work. I don't even remember his name now. I didn't even see him. It was online and by phone. I realized that if just by having a phone and an internet connection, I'm able to do this, then surely, there's potential with this work. That was one turning point.

Another turning point was when I got external validation from the American Bar Association as a Legal Rebel in September 2014, on my birthday. That came at a point

where, honestly, I had no idea what I was doing. I'd just left law school. There was pressure to find a job and to start going down the law path, but I'm doing BarefootLaw. Our SMS had only about 100 [responses], and our social media also had about 100 [messages] or slightly over that.

The American Bar Association saw the potential way before anyone else. They took a bet and put me on the cover of that magazine, the *ABA Journal* in 2014. I hadn't paid rent for about seven months. I was absolutely doing badly. Just having that validation, having myself on that magazine cover generated attention in the legal space, but also locally, because then some local newspapers picked it up with a story, "BarefootLawyer goes to America," not knowing there was nothing that came with that recognition apart from appearing on the cover.

No one else was taking this whole thing seriously, but when ABA did that, things started getting serious. I received many phone calls. That's when I got a teaching job at one of the universities nearby, and used all my salary to hire an assistant to take phone calls that came into the office. That's when my mind also switched towards giving this a bet.

Carly Lanning: What inspired the name?

Gerald Abila: The name BarefootLaw comes from a point of purity. What guides us is the law. For the law to work, we need to get rid of impurities that prevent it from working. If someone comes to you for legal help, you need to get rid of your impurities and give them the law as pure as it is. The law minus your gender biases, minus your tribal biases, and in our case, minus your racial biases. Biases against sexual orientation, biases against geographic, socioeconomic.

That's when the law will work. Where I come from, to be barefoot is to be pure. You never enter a shrine in shoes. You never enter your parents' bedroom in shoes. We are born barefoot. If you respect a place, you will remove your shoes before you go in. The logo is a foot moving forward, using the law to move that foot forward. It's progress. It's to create peaceful communities where people can thrive, the kind of community we want to create.

If you look at the continent of Africa, we have a lot of problems, and so many of them are man-made. We're so blessed to be at a place where humanity started. I'm from Uganda. Homo sapiens started at a place called Olduvai Gorge right by the lake on the Tanzanian side, Lake Victoria Basin in the Ethiopian Highlands, not very far from here. It's the most lovely and the most beautiful part of the Earth. Yet we have so many challenges as a continent. The biggest challenge we have is a breakdown in the way we resolve conflicts peacefully. By the time you see a nation having a war, it's from a build-up of so many things going wrong that the ultimate resolution they thought would be better than anything else is conflict.

If we provide ways in which people can understand the law, and ways in which they can use it to resolve problems peacefully, then we will start breaking down these things in communities that eventually lead to conflict. A big portion of problem resolution on our

continent relates to how people access the law, and how they use it to resolve conflicts. We shouldn't wait to bring in peacekeepers. We should actively work at this level to prevent the rule of law from breaking down. At a broader scale, when you look at that foot, it's an African foot stepping forward. If we use the law and make it readily available, then people can use it to prevent and resolve problems. They face reduced conflict, and then this continent will thrive. Technology gives us that superpower now more than ever. That's the philosophy behind the name and the symbol, which I designed myself.

Carly Lanning: Will you tell me a little bit about your funding when you started, and how has it diversified and changed over time?

Gerald Abila: We started with absolutely no funding for the first three years of BarefootLaw. I formally registered it on March 13, 2013. In Uganda, you do four years of law school, and then one year at the bar course. I registered BarefootLaw while I was in the bar course, not knowing what I was doing or getting paid for it.

I would do all sorts of jobs on the website, draft contracts and things like that. I ran BarefootLaw from my bedroom at first, nothing fancy, just to pay for my internet and feed myself. It started growing later when we got the *ABA Journal* recognition. That's when I took on a teaching assistant job at a university. I was paid about \$160. I used that money to hire an office assistant to wait for visitors and answer calls, because people had started coming in. Dorcas was a university student then, but she was my first employee and has stayed on ever since.

Then in 2015, we won the best Facebook page in Africa. That was a continental competition, and it came with \$1,000. For someone with a budget of \$160 a month, \$1,000 was a lot. That enabled us to further stabilize. Our first source of earning was through awards. Then we won a local award, \$10,000 in 2015. Then the Echoing Green fellowship came in 2016. That was the first breather we had. At this time, two others had joined me, someone I met at law school and a long-time friend of mine. They knew they were not taking any pay, but they would help me with some of these side hustles, the contracts et cetera, and then we'd put all that into the organization. Echoing Green was a breather. That was \$80,000 over two years. I used that to finally build myself a team and get a bigger office space. Then the DRK Foundation grant came. We started by relying on awards, and then we went to family foundations. That's how we grew. A lot of our budget is unrestricted revenues from family foundations, but also about 30% is restricted revenue streams for projects we've implemented.

Carly Lanning: What type of funding or support do you need to keep scaling? What would be the most helpful?

Gerald Abila: We need unrestricted, multinational, multi-country funding for this type of work. One other reason we grew as BarefootLaw is that we did not focus on restricted grants. A lot of those in the access to justice space focus on restricted grants. Everything is a project cycle. BarefootLaw avoided that. Now we have teams we've been with for 10 years, for instance. A lot of these innovations were trial and error, which we would not have done if we had restricted grants.

Especially for justice, I know there are communities now in which we operate where we've reduced conflicts by 90%. There is one community where we set up our first virtual law box, where there were murders almost every month. They've not had murders in two years now. They've not had mob justice. Beating up people used to be very common. They've not had that. Offenses against women have reduced by 90%. There used to be so many assaults. Why the reduction? Because we lit up the place, and provided mechanisms through which a lot of these disputes can get resolved by working with the police station, community courts, and things like that.

Part of what we do is carry out sensitizations by going to a community and educating local leaders and community justice champions for basic things. We select people and keep going with them for a year, meeting with them once a month to talk about the law and things like that.

Mob justice is such a big problem in Uganda because people have lost faith in the justice system, especially. There are no justice places in some rural communities where we operate online. We operate across the country, but we also operate virtual offices, which we call the BarefootLaw Boxes, in deep rural communities, hard-to-reach places.

In one particular place, the first place where we put a BarefootLaw Box, there was a lot of mob justice. Two guys were suspected of stealing cows and they ran away, but the community got them and started beating them up, almost burning them, because they beat and then they burn. Then someone ran in and told them that the lawyer said don't beat them, take them to the police station instead. Several people started trying to stop the lynching, because they had attended one of our sessions, and they knew to take them to the police station instead. In the commotion, the two guys managed to run to the police station and they were saved. For me, that was an eye-opener because I wasn't really onboard for this sort of approach. I was more for using tech.

Just that example shows that once a seed is planted, sometimes it keeps growing in ways you would never imagine. Regardless of whatever we did, we saved two lives. Regardless of anything, at least if I'm ever held to account at the end of my days, I'll say I saved two lives. That, for me, is success. That's another case that stayed in my mind because that was nothing more than providing information.

The best funding, no matter how much or little it is, is when someone gives us money, and tells us they will stay with us for five years, and wants us to just keep doing what we're doing. That gives us breathing space to figure things out. That's what has worked for us, whether it's with the Echoing Green fellowship, the DRK grant, or others.

Carly Lanning: How are you looking to scale? Are there specific ways that foundations or grants can be supportive in that scaling?

Gerald Abila: We want to have more BarefootLaw Boxes. The law is complicated. Through the years, we've tried to train people, but legal services get very complicated. It's something we do excellently, but the tools of delivery are something that perhaps

someone else can do. What is the cheapest way for us to make the law available while letting someone else handle all the other things? That has guided our scaling plan.

We have our online system in communities. Anyone can get in touch with us by just sending a pro bono message or calling on the phone, social media, any platform. All that information is aggregated, and then our responses go out to that person. For those that don't have internet or other gadgets, we have solar-powered shipping containers with two TVs that we place in these rural communities, run by someone in that community. They're usually put at places where people come to get services like the town council in the town center.

A lot of the impact that BarefootLaw has today is from those, because now we're doing community mediations. We're training local courts. We're training customary leaders. We are handling complicated cases. We're now also carrying out court depositions, so witnesses don't have to go to courts that are 100 kilometers away. They can just come to these places and virtually talk to a judge. Those places now have lawyers who are based in Kampala that connect virtually. We have lawyers who speak local languages.

So far, we have three. We're fabricating a fourth one. We plan to have 15 of these across Uganda, in every subregion. So far, we're in three subregions. For us to achieve the impact we want to achieve across the country, the scaling plan is to have a box in every subregion, at least for the next five years. We already have agreements with the town councils we work with that are waiting for the boxes. They give us the space, and we put in the box.

Our scaling plan is to have a box in every subregion in the next five years, and also scale the way we do things across Africa. We're already working in Kenya, Malawi, and Zambia to teach them the BarefootLaw way. That's mostly a systems change and movement-building aspect. We have about 20 institutions, and now we're working with community justice providers, but we're teaching them how to do justice the BarefootLaw way. For Uganda, we want a deeper outreach through the boxes.

Carly Lanning: Will you tell me about the impact that working with Rippleworks has had for you, and any gaps or challenges in the capacity-building with them?

Gerald Abila: The capacity-building was excellent, because it's something we've been so focused on doing for the past 10 years. We noticed that our model changed in practice. BarefootLaw 10 years later is so different from BarefootLaw at the beginning. We were so focused on the delivery. We never stopped to pause and rethink our narrative, or to rethink our communication. We were still communicating the way we were in 2013, which was so disconnected from what we were actually doing. That also caused problems in communicating what we do. It became so difficult getting all this done, and trying to communicate it to someone. That also affects partnerships and fundraising. The last year for us was time to stop, pause, reflect and redirect.

We focused the whole of last year, especially the last half, on rethinking what BarefootLaw was from a communications perspective, and an impact measurement

perspective. The communications work we did with Rippleworks showed us where we start and where we end. Once we figured that out, we worked on everything from what BarefootLaw is to our overall impact, which is to create peaceful communities in which people can thrive.

Having that in mind, we were then able to come up with an impact measurement plan and a new theory of change, working with different experts. Now that we know where to start and end, it's easier to work on impact measurement. Everything fell into place and became clearer. Rippleworks especially helped in fine-tuning our communication.

Carly Lanning: Is there anything you wish that you had known at the start of your Rippleworks partnership that you know now?

Gerald Abila: I didn't think it would be that important. If I'd known, I probably would have included many more team members. I knew it was important, but I didn't think it would go that deep. I didn't think there was a connection between the communications and the impact measurement, to who we really are. Also because of the experts we had, DeSean, who was helping with communications, and Sean, with Rippleworks. They did a lot of listening. At some point, it was us doing most of the talking, and then it bounced over to them. They parked it, and came back with a plan. I told DeSean that it reminded me of law. When you go through law school, you realize there's a formula or there's a science behind everything, including communication.

Carly Lanning: Anything else you would love to share? Any advice for funders?

Gerald Abila: I spoke to Doug Galen when I was in San Francisco. The world is going crazy. We're on this path because I believe in a certain world, in certain values. This is how I was raised, I have no choice. I don't know any other world. Being on this path and coming into touch with many funders who share these values, we've been taught many things. We've been given so many skills. In my case, the most valuable has been the leadership skills and the guidance to navigate uncertainties. Of course, coming from Uganda, there's a lot of uncertainty. Every time there's an election, you pack your bags, and wait. Every day is a fight in a way, but we stayed.

All these countries where we operate, if it was easy, probably everyone would be doing it. We stayed not because we don't have a choice, but because we believe in these values that are under attack. It wouldn't be fair to the values if many funders start pulling back as well. Have the attackers intended them to react? To protect the values that we so much believe in, we should double down. The last foot soldiers of these values are the people in these portfolios that so many foundations and fellowships support. If they see funders pulling back instead of doubling down, like we did during COVID, then it also shakes their faith in this system we've served for so long, and in these values we serve. I want the same values for my kids. I don't want to imagine my kids growing up in a world where it's okay to be a macho man, where might makes right. We've seen where we end up with that. History has a funny way of repeating itself.

We've seen where the values that are being pushed in the world today will lead us to a very dark place where our kids will pay the price. Unfortunately, it is where we are, and we need to double down. At the grassroots level, we need to put our foot forward and amplify the work that we are doing. Those on the funding side should also double down and figure out resilient ways to still keep operating, but also to operate more. Once we lose these people in the network we've created, there are no people on the front lines anymore. The values we fought against, that we despise, that led us to conflict, will be the values that thrive.

My message to them is, you've done a tremendous job, especially in instilling these skills in us. I'm a product of so many of these skills. Impact measurement, leadership, dealing with resilience. They've carried us all through, and even through COVID, I kept my team. I never cut anyone's salary. For two freaking years, we never pulled back. When the lockdown was lifted, we went back to the communities. Cases had piled up so much, but we went back there to operate because it's something we believe in. At a time when our values are under attack, for funders especially, it is time for them to double down. It's not time to wait and see. It's not time to retreat. This, too, will pass. It's never easy. Sometimes it gets disappointing when you see allies on that side, instead of pulling back. It should be us to pull back. My advice to them is to invest more in the people you have created, and the values you believe in.

These values we've created will prevail, because this is just who we are as humanity. No one taught us how to be like this, it's just what we should be. We've enjoyed peace for the past 70 years. We should keep enjoying it. My message to funders is to double down. It's time to do more. It's not time to start getting divided and saying no, but just to do more in whatever way, whether it's capacity-building, finding more people on the front line, or funding, which should be the easiest, or creating networks where people can exchange ideas, because everyone is confused. This is a unique time. These lessons are what we have to rely on to make decisions to get us through, so let's double down. It's not time to pull back, for the sake of those that come after us.

I grew up in conflict. For the first 10 years of my life, we ran from one place to another. I realized, so many years later, that I was an IDP internally displaced person. We should not go back to that sort of world. We should double down and move forward regardless. I am not in those circles, but maybe you could pass it on to Rippleworks. I know they have communities of people like that. Just ask them to double down because there are so many people at the front lines for whom that is a lifeline.

Carly Lanning: Thank you for all of the work that you're doing.

[Carly Lanning](#) is a trauma-informed journalist and founder of Voices Editorial LLC, a communication consultancy providing a variety of writing, editing, impact storytelling, and marketing services to mission-driven organizations and nonprofits. She's worked in communications across a variety of fields including the philanthropy, digital media, publishing, and gender-based violence spaces. Carly Lanning is passionate about using storytelling to uplift and empower human connecting, healing, and social change. Her articles - many of which focus on the topics mental health and sexual violence - have been published in *Psychology Today*, *Ms. Magazine*, *HelpGuide*, and more.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.