

The Weekend



The Pursuit of Purpose

Author, anthropologist and social innovator Ken Banks on writing about his journey from Five Oaks to Zimbabwe, developing the game-changing text messaging system FrontlineSMS and sharing the stage with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Sir David Attenborough

The Weekend *Big Read*

'I left my job and sold everything'

Multi-talented social innovator Ken Banks changed the lives of millions when he developed the text messaging system FrontlineSMS. The Jersey-born entrepreneur spoke to **Tom Ogg** about his new book detailing his life, his work and the pursuit of purpose

THE search to discover the meaning of life is something that has enthralled great minds for centuries, from the philosophers of Ancient Greece and the celebrated Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl to Monty Python's Flying Circus ('What's it all about then?').

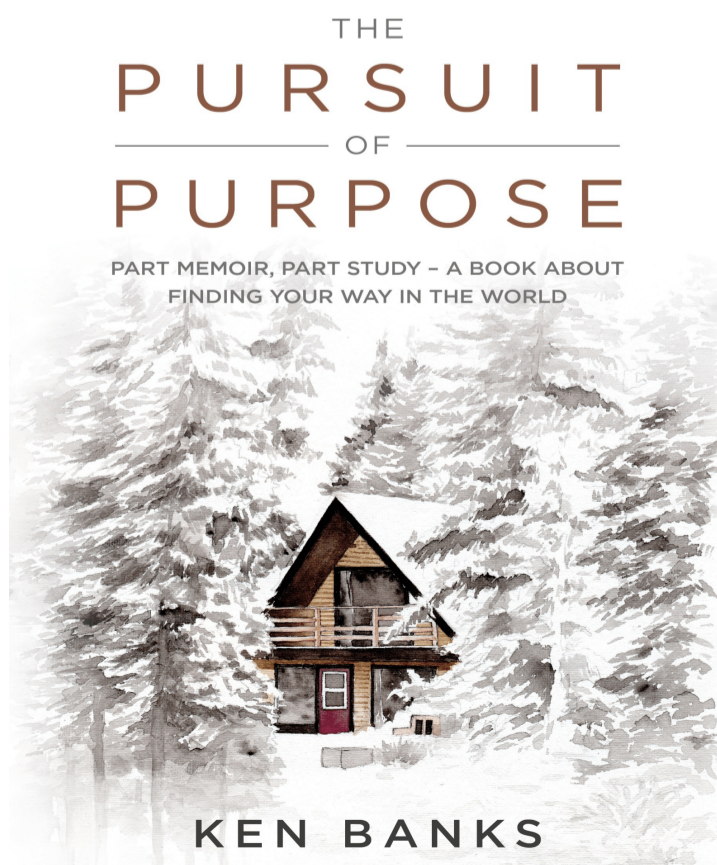
And now Jersey-born anthropologist, technologist and social innovator Ken Banks has sought answers to this age-old conundrum with his latest book.

Titled *The Pursuit of Purpose: Part Memoir, Part Study – A Book About Finding Your Way in the World*, the 384-page volume sees Ken – who devised and developed the revolutionary text messaging system FrontlineSMS – revisiting his Jersey childhood and his subsequent globetrotting career in order to find purpose in life and impart advice and wisdom to readers in the process.

Described by Ken as 'a memoir, a travelogue, a book about serendipity and chance', the eye-opening true-life tales recounted throughout *The Pursuit of Purpose* demonstrate that 'anyone, anywhere – wherever they come from – can make the world a better place'.

'From a young age, I always felt I was put on the earth for a reason – I just had no idea what it was, or where to find it,'

■ The cover of *The Pursuit of Purpose: Part Memoir, Part Study – A Book About Finding Your Way in the World*: 'From start to finish, the book took just short of two years for me to write. The first two sections of the book document my journey from the Five Oaks estate all the way to my work across Africa and my travels as I sought some sort of meaning in my life, and then it moves onto the work I did with mobile technology that went on to have a huge global impact'



■ Ken relaxing on the banks of the Mana Pools National Park in Zimbabwe. Picture: BRENDA BURRELL

says the 55-year-old married father-of-three, who today works as head of social purpose at Yoti Ltd.

'I think a lot of people share these feelings, and they are feelings that seem to get stronger as you grow older. *The Pursuit of Purpose* documents my own journey to finding purpose in life. I did eventually find it, and live it, which is something that came as a huge relief.'

The seeds of Ken's life-affirming journey were first planted in 1985 when, aged 19, he watched Live Aid on TV and found himself deeply moved by the experience.

'It led to an unexpected awakening,' he recalls. 'Live Aid led me to try and understand how I could contribute to helping make the world a better place. I developed a huge interest in humanitarian work but, back then, I never really expected that I would ever get the chance to go to Africa and work on a project.'

That all changed in 1993 when Ken spotted a Jersey Overseas Aid advert in the JEP ('it was on page two if you're

curious') in which the local charitable organisation requested volunteers for humanitarian work in Zambia.

'I have a huge amount to thank Jersey Overseas Aid for,' he says. 'It was that first trip to Zambia in 1993 with Kevin Daly and Vanessa Nash that changed everything for me. Zambia gave me a taste of life for other people, all of whom had a much harder time of it than I did. I hate to say it, but I felt incredibly guilty, and I couldn't just continue my comfortable life after seeing poverty so close up.'

'I ended up going on another trip in 1995 with Ray Middleton, who is sadly no longer with us,' he continues. 'I decided I wanted to commit to working in the humanitarian sector and so I left my job, I sold everything I owned and I headed off to university to study development studies.'

In the years that followed, Ken lived and worked in many African countries, among them Malawi, Uganda, Nigeria, Cameroon, South Africa, Mozambique and Rwanda.

'It was the experiences and understanding of poverty in these places that heavily influenced all of my future work,' he says. 'I knew I wanted to focus on supporting local people and local innovators in order to help them solve their own problems. I wasn't interested in charity as such, more empowering those closest to the problems, and those who were better placed and incentivised to fix them.'

It was this mindset that subsequently led to tech-minded Ken developing FrontlineSMS in 2005.

The game-changing text messaging system – which works without an internet connection – was created with the specific aim of enabling communication between conservationists and communities in South Africa. It would prove to be a truly groundbreaking invention in the world of mobile phone technology.

'FrontlineSMS was developed at a time when mobile technology was only just showing promise in helping to solve humanitarian and environmental problems in the developing world,' says Ken. 'Back then, it was a bit of a Wild West, an age of exploration, and I'm hugely grateful to have been around to not only experience it, but to end up building one of the most successful platforms to emerge from that era.'

As detailed in *The Pursuit of Purpose*, Ken first mastered the ins and outs of computer programming under the guidance of Mr Cooper, a former teacher

at St Michael's School.

'Mr Cooper ran a computer club in the building at the side of the school and it was there that I learnt to code,' he says. 'When the idea for FrontlineSMS came to me, I knew I had the skills to write it myself.'

'Of course, I never knew if it would actually work, or whether it would be needed in the ways that I thought it might be needed.'

'I write in the book about how it was then picked up by activists in Zimbabwe, who were fighting Mugabe's brutal regime, and I remember thinking at the time: "If FrontlineSMS is only ever used for this, I'll be more than happy".'

Although initially FrontlineSMS 'didn't set the world on fire', the Nigerian presidential elections in 2007 proved to be a major breakthrough for the innovative text messaging system and soon Ken's creation was making international headlines.

'It was used to monitor the elections in Nigeria, the BBC got hold of the story – and life went crazy,' he says. 'Donors started calling me up, and money that I'd never really thought of needing or asking for suddenly started coming my way. It all took off.'

Indeed it did. Before long, Ken and an ever-growing team of staff found themselves with offices across three continents and with 30 million people using FrontlineSMS in almost 200 countries, resulting in multiple well-deserved awards from Silicon Valley, National Geographic and elsewhere.

'I ended up flying to different places almost weekly and talking about FrontlineSMS at various gatherings and conferences, sharing the story of how something built with few resources and no plan became one of the most successful technology projects to emerge from the mobile era.'

'I still don't think I've come to terms with the impact it had for so many people,' he adds. 'Without a doubt, FrontlineSMS saved me, and provided an outlet for my passion for positive change and for making the world a better place. I don't know what I would have done without it.'

All of which might seem to suggest that Ken's path from impassioned youngster to wildly successful entrepreneur was relatively straightforward. In reality, however, the journey was far from painless, with a near-fatal motorcycle accident in Nigeria just one of numerous white-knuckle occurrences.

(Cont on page 26)

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'It all feels surreal – and

(Cont from page 25)

'I don't want to give away too many spoilers [from the book], but I almost drowned on my very first trip to Africa, and there was a *very* close escape from some lions while I was wild camping in Zimbabwe,' he says.

'There have been numerous cases of serendipity and chance in getting me to where I am today. As someone who always felt he was in control of his own life and destiny, good luck – and bad luck – have shaped me more than I ever expected.'

Born and raised in Jersey, Ken attended St Martin's School and St Helier Boys School (now D'Hautree), before being selected for Hautlieu ('I failed abysmally') and then Highlands College.

The majority of his childhood and early adult life was spent on the housing estate at Five Oaks where he and his family lived.

'The estate was quite new back in the early 1970s,' he says. 'There were a lot more open spaces, many with small trees and patches of grass, and it all felt a lot more inviting back then. We were like most kids in those days, playing outside most of the time – we always found plenty to do.'

'Looking back, it feels like another world, a magical time. Kids don't seem to be outside as much these days. We had few distractions – no video games, no mobile phones, no internet. We just had spaces to play and plenty of imagination. I even had a JEP van round at one stage – Bill Tizard was my driver.'

'There used to be a large area called "the dump",' he continues. 'It was in the far back corner of the estate and we'd play football there and generally hang out. It's all car parking spaces and flats now – my mum ended up living in one of them.'

Today, Ken lives in the picturesque Cambridge countryside with his wife, Elina, and their three children, Henry (10) and eight-year-old twins Maddie and Ollie.

'We are located on the edge of the village and across the road we have the Fens and rivers,' he says. 'I have a canoe and I take the kids out on the river in the summer. We have a really good-sized garden that backs onto open fields, and we've just bought a bit of extra land to turn into an allotment. We're hoping to keep chickens, grow fruit, keep bees – that sort of thing. It is thanks to my mother that I have such a huge love for being outdoors, and I'm excited to have a little plot of land that I can work on. Anything to balance all the time I spend in front of a computer screen.'

Although he occasionally returns to the Island on which he spent his formative years, Ken says much of Jersey has now changed beyond recognition.



■ Ken with Sir David Attenborough

'I visited the Five Oaks estate a couple of years ago, which is something I write about in the book, and the whole place has changed so much. Everything felt built over, boarded up, closed off. It's how most things seem to be these days. The Five Oaks pub is almost completely different as well.'

'We'd not have been allowed anywhere near the place if it had been like it is today when I was younger,' he adds with a laugh.

The opening chapter of *The Pursuit of Purpose* is titled 'Ordinary' and, writing in the book, Ken says this single word sums up how he viewed himself during childhood.

'It was how I felt about my early life,' he says. 'You know, people have often told me how inspiring they find my story, how someone with a fairly challenging background could go on to have a global impact, to travel with the British Prime Minister, to win awards from National Geographic, to work with icons such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and to raise millions of dollars for their work. But none of this was ever expected, least of all

by me.'

In the later chapters of the book, Ken unflinchingly details how he struggled to come to terms with the scale of his achievements following the global success of FrontlineSMS, describing himself as succumbing to 'imposter syndrome'.

'Despite being surrounded by photos of me with the likes of Bill Clinton and Sir David Attenborough, and having many trophies and plaques that were presented to me over the years, it still feels surreal – and I think it probably always will.'

It was such feelings that initially made Ken apprehensive about writing a book detailing his life story: 'It all felt so unreal, unbelievable, a mess. But then the Covid-19 pandemic arrived, and that offered plenty of time for me to think and reflect.'

'I'm also getting older, and my children are growing up and starting to ask questions about my work and my travels. They ask: "Who all these people in the photos?" I also felt that I needed some kind of closure on a hugely productive period in my life, one which is now behind me but which very much shaped

who I am.'

When it comes to writing a book, be it a memoir or otherwise, it always helps if the author has a passion for the written word. Thankfully, Ken has such a passion in spades, with his neat and engaging prose making *The Pursuit of Purpose* into something of a page-turner.

'I have always loved writing,' he says. 'As a child, I wrote a lot of poetry and I was fortunate to get a lot of encouragement, not only from my mother, but also from Mr King, who was my English teacher at St Helier Boys School.'

'In a way, writing has always been a big part of my life, and I seemed to have a natural flair for it. When I was 11, I wrote what you might call my first book, which was a study of the Amoco Cadiz oil disaster, an event that resulted in crude oil washing up on the Island's beaches.'

Fast forward four decades and Ken says that writing *The Pursuit of Purpose* proved to be 'relatively easy and enjoyable'.

'The words just flowed and the book came together quite quickly,' he says. 'The biggest challenge was finding the time, juggling work with family life and other things I needed to do, and so I ended up grabbing an hour here, 30 minutes there, and so on. And, slowly and steadily, it came together.'

'I didn't have any sort of writing plan,

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'A book about how I got from A to B wouldn't have been that amazing on its own. For me, helping people to get from their own A to their own B felt far more important. Giving back has always been important to me'



■ Ken working on the FrontlineSMS mobile phone project in Malawi Picture: HAYLEY CAPP/CARE UK

it probably always will'



■ Ken talking on stage alongside Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Beyond Good Intentions founder Tori Hogan Picture: EVAN SWINEHART/UNREASONABLE AT SEA

other than to grab any spare time I could,' he continues. 'I love walking and so I spent a lot of time wandering the countryside nearby, clearing my mind and writing a lot in my head as I went, plotting and planning, and then hastily getting it down on the computer when I got home.'

'Some parts of the book came to me while walking and driving, some parts while I was in the shower, others while I was cooking roast dinner. Inspiration really does come at the most unexpected – and often inconvenient – of times.'

'The structure of the book also came together organically. I was writing it without a real sense of how it was going to fit together. I broke all the rules when I think about it. Figuring out how it was all going to hang together was one of my biggest earlier challenges, but I trusted the process and I'm very pleased with the end result.'

As with so many modern-day authors, Ken decided to self-publish the resultant work, but this in itself created a number of unforeseen challenges.

'There were a whole raft of issues, from registering ISBN numbers and sorting out the typesetting and layout to designing the cover, designing the website, copy editing, publishing on various online platforms, and so on. I'd never done any of this before. The reality is that writing is only a small part of the process. I soon discovered that putting it all together and marketing it is far more work.'

'Of course, the most rewarding part comes at the very end, when all those Google Docs turn into a physical book, something you can hold, and feel, and admire. Until you hold the book in your hands, it doesn't quite feel real. I remember sitting outside in the garden in early spring, two years ago, writing the opening sentences. Now I'm holding a book which is over 300 pages and it feels surreal when I think back to those early days.'

It is in the final chapters of *The Pursuit of Purpose* that Ken, having journeyed through his own life and career, focuses intently on exploring the meaning of life.

'The third part of the book is more of a study of purpose, and of life, meaning and happiness in different cultures,' he says. 'I studied anthropology at university and so this was a natural thing for me to do, but this section of the book needed

a lot of proper research and a far more structured approach to my writing. I found it harder to write. People seem to think I'm a good writer, but it's not always as easy as it looks.'

'I also share tips and advice from my own journey that I hope will help the reader to make sense of where they are, and help with any aspirations they might have to go out and try and make the world a better place. This final part of the book took the longest to write, but it was important to round everything off. A book about how I got from A to B wouldn't have been that amazing on its own. For me, helping people to get from their own A to their own B felt far more important. Giving back has always been important to me.'

As the conversation draws to a close, and given the unsettling global events that have taken place over the last two years, I ask Ken if he believes that it is still possible for a single person to change the world for the better.

'Well, I believe that a single person can change someone else's world for the better, or a few people's worlds for the better, but changing the world? I'm not so sure. Helping a small number of people is more achievable than aiming, or hoping, or expecting, to change the lives

of millions.'

'I remember years ago sitting on a cruise ship filled with students and talking to them about changing the world with Archbishop Desmond Tutu – a surreal event documented in the book. The Arch, as he was fondly known, believed people could change the world. I argued the opposite, pointing to the fact that very few people have ever managed to do it. Sadly, it's easier to be evil and destructive and change the world that way. Just look through the history books, or even at what is happening in the world today.'

'One of my frustrations with the humanitarian and social sectors has always been the focus on large-scale impact,' he concludes. 'It is as if your efforts are only worthy and valuable if huge numbers of people benefit. But if we all set out to help the lives of, say, two or three people, we'd be done. We need a shift in mindset if we are ever to really begin tackling the huge inequalities in the world – not just in faraway places, but on our own doorsteps.'

* *The Pursuit of Purpose: Part Memoir, Part Study – A Book About Finding Your Way in the World* by Ken Banks is available now on Amazon UK.

WHILE writing *The Pursuit of Purpose*, Ken uncovered many hitherto unknown details about his family history. Here, he discusses the discovery...

'I've known for some time that my family had a pretty interesting background. For example, I'd been aware for years that one of our ancestors was the Mayor of Brighton, so it was funny to find myself studying at university there and visiting the sort of places he would have hung out.'

'During the last few years of her life, my mother had begun digging deeper into our ancestry, but she didn't get too far. As the Covid-19 pandemic took hold, and I started reflecting on my life, my work and my journey, I decided to see what I could find out. I joined a well-known ancestry site, but I've never been that good at understanding family trees, and so I went to an online site that I'd previously used to hire web developers, techies and so on, and I posted there asking for help digging up some family history.'

'I eventually found a researcher in Ukraine and he found a couple of other relatives of mine, including one called Roger, still living, who had been doing his own extensive family history research for years. Roger and I ended up speaking on the phone, and he offered to share everything he'd found with me. Suddenly this whole new world opened up right in front of me. I learned about relatives who had built the first bicycle in England, others who became successful entrepreneurs in America, and another who worked at Bletchley Park and who decoded the intercepted German High Command message announcing Hitler's death.'

'The final chapter of my book looks at my family, and how so much of what they did in their lives reflected, and weaved, into mine. It felt like the right way to finish the book: to end with those who helped shape me.'



■ A mountain gorilla, photographed by Ken: 'It posed for the camera perfectly'