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In Zambia, BU students bring education to refugees

By: Jenna Nierstedt
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Camera in hand, Jacquelyn Woods traveled through Zambia hoping to improve refugees' quality of life.

Woods, a College of Communication junior, is one of about 10 Boston University students who spent their summer volunteering in a Zambian refugee camp with FORGE, a student-run, nonprofit organization that works to improve living conditions in the camps.

The students worked at the Meheba Refugee Camp in Zambia helping refugees who relocated to the camp to escape internal crises in their countries.

FORGE, a California-based group started by a Stanford University student three years ago, has representation in 22 universities across North America and is sanctioned by a United Nations refugee agency.

Although it advertises through the BU International Programs Office, FORGE is not explicitly affiliated with the university but asks college-aged participants to work in partners to develop and implement programs to improve refugees' quality of life. Woods taught refugees to use cameras and also promoted computer literacy, and she filmed a documentary of her experience.

"The simple action of [involving students] really breaks down a lot of boundaries and sort of changes the notion of a refugee as a really distant, untouchable image to a more tangible reality that can be dealt with," said College of Arts and Sciences senior Joseph Lippi, who will be traveling to Zambia for the first time this summer.

BU students, who must raise funds to go to Africa and work in the program, develop projects to help the refugees. These projects have included HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, cultural enrichment through art projects, income generation and education.

CAS junior Jim Gaylor, who is going to Zambia this summer, said FORGE prides itself on training refugees in job skills and not just solely donating money to them.

"In order for a development project to truly work and sustain itself, it needs to be culturally sensitive, logistically possible, socially accepted but most importantly, there has to be a great and deep need for that project to work," said FORGE International Operations Director Esther Chou, a Northeastern University junior.

One of the many projects FORGE brought to the camp was the Meheba Entrepreneurs' Society and Institute, which gives small loans with low interest rates to refugees and Zambian locals, said MESI Director Peter D'Aleo, a School of Management junior. The institute's teaching efforts help refugees start up their own businesses.

"Before I went to Meheba, I was very business-oriented, greedy businessman, the dark side of SMG," D'Aleo said. "But now, I see there's a social element. There are reasons for earning money, which can help the community and help the world -- it's a good type of business."

MESI also provides free business workshops with lessons in accounting, basic math skills and finances.

"It gives folks in precarious positions the ability to receive education and a little bit of money to start up something and allow them to give back to the community," said NU College of Business Administration professor William Tita, whose curriculum forms the basis of the workshop's teachings.

Chou, who also co-founded MESI, said refugees' problems include lack of access to education, lack of mobility, fear of camp authority, hunger, fear of being moved back to their home countries and statelessness.

"MESI works to combat poverty, one household at a time, by giving these small loans with little interest so that people can facilitate their own opportunities to get out of poverty," she said.

MESI has yielded a 91 percent repayment rate and increased the average monthly incomes for more than 100 refugees by about \$25, Chou said.

Woods, who did not work with MESI, said she still had a life-changing summer because she witnessed and was able to alleviate pain and suffering firsthand.

"I believe that the most neglected people in this world are the refugees," Woods said. "They have been through hell and back, their countries have forgotten them and don't want them there because they take up land and jobs and are just another mouth to feed.

"With a camera in my hand, I had so much power to do something for them," she continued. "It's very overwhelming."