

Local grad to teach refugees

BY ANDREA REEVES | COMMUNITY PRESS STAFF WRITER
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WYOMING - When she was little, Elizabeth Kersten daydreamed about becoming a doctor, taking a plane to Africa and dispensing medicine to the poor and making everyone better.

"My dad did an internship ... and would come back with these slide shows of people dying of diseases readily treatable here, but they didn't have the resources or the knowledge.

"I always felt there was something wrong with that," she said.



This summer, Kersten, a Stanford University junior and Wyoming High School graduate, will get to live her dream when she boards a plane for Zambia, Africa, to set up a health clinic for Republic of Congo refugees living in the Mwanze refugee camp.

For two months she and seven other students will put together a health, outreach and education center in the camp to address needs of the refugees as part of an on-campus non-profit called Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment, an organization that partners students with refugee communities in Zambia.

"A lot of them still have traditional belief systems they rely on a lot for their health care," said Kersten, who studies international medicine at Stanford.

"A lot of the refugees don't know how to properly deal with things like diarrhea, and a lot of children are dying because of a lack of basic health care techniques."

Students at the clinic will teach the people these techniques while trying to understand their beliefs about health care.

The group also plans to train refugees in the camp so they can become experts in health topics that affect them, so when the students leave, the camp will be permanent.

Through her theoretical research to learn what it will take to set up the clinic, Kersten is realizing how complicated her childhood dream is in reality.

Kersten and the other students must present a concrete plan to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees so they can get all the resources they'll need ahead of time.

"If we find out we need more information on effective prevention of HIV, AIDS, it's not as easy as going to a computer and looking it up. We won't have access to anything."

In addition to a health clinic, other students are going to start a women's empowerment group to give women job skills, a repatriation project to prepare refugees to return to the Congo when it's safe again, and a library.

"I think by the time we're ready to go we will have been working so hard and reading about the camp and the situation and getting all this knowledge from research we will be ready to be able to act," she said.

"Going there and meeting the people and working with people face-to-face is going to be really cool."

Kersten is trying to raise \$5,000 for her trip.

To donate, visit www.forgenow.org, and include her name in the memo to send a donation directly to her project.

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