

February 21, 2006

In the business of helping refugees

Activist's nonprofit sends students to volunteer in Africa

By **MARTIN ESPINOZA**
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



HELPING TO REBUILD

FORGE sends university students to refugee camps in Africa. The group has built and stocked libraries, established sports programs, created shelters for abused women and conducted HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns. www.forgeprogram.org

When describing her volunteer efforts in African refugee camps, Kjerstin Erickson sounds more like a financier than an activist. The former Miss Sonoma County says foreign exchange rates in Africa allow for a greater "social return on investment" and "more bang for your buck."

"Today's young people recognize that they only have one life to give and a pair of hands," Erickson said. "They want to make choices that are going to essentially maximize the net return on their investment."

The business-like approach to helping refugees belies the emotional impact of the work being done by the

22-year-old Santa Rosa High School graduate, who returned to Santa Rosa to help raise money for a nonprofit organization she founded three years ago.

Erickson established FORGE while studying public policy and African Studies at Stanford University. The group sends promising students from American universities to volunteer in African refugee camps.

The name stands for Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment.

Students in the program have built and stocked libraries, established sports programs, created shelters for abused and battered women and conducted HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns.

In October, Erickson's accomplishments were recognized by Glamour magazine, which named her a winner in its 47th annual Top 10 College Women Competition.

Her trajectory is no surprise to

those in Sonoma County who know her.

"She's totally giving and generous and really has had a broad perspective of the world and wanting to find her place in it as someone who helps people," said Holly White-Wolfe, a health information specialist for the Sonoma County Health Department and the former director of the Youth Volunteer Corp through the Volunteer Center.

Erickson's dedication to keeping FORGE afloat, which runs on a shoestring budget of about \$160,000, prompted her to interrupt her studies at Stanford.

Most of the money comes from volunteers, who must raise \$4,500 for their travel and living expenses, and also to fund projects they will be working on in Africa.

The nonprofit runs a deficit of about \$50,000, which must be covered by fund-raising efforts and dona-

“Today’s young people recognize that they only have one life to give and a pair of hands.”
KJERSTIN ERICKSON, 22, founder of nonprofit that aids refugees



Former Miss Sonoma County Kjerstin Erickson founded a volunteer organization that sends American university students to work in African refugee camps.

MARK ARONOFF / The Press Democrat

HELPING: Has programs in 3 refugee settlements in Zambia

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tions. For now, Erickson's studies at Stanford are being put on hold until FORGE can stand on its own.

Each year, FORGE selects students, or "ambassadors," who are likely to become leaders in their field of study, matching their talents with the specific needs found in the refugee camps.

Erickson said the yearlong commitment, which includes a 2-month stint at a refugee camp, gives American students the opportunity to address poverty on a scale few ever see first hand.

For Erickson, it started with an African safari she took with her family when she was in high school. She said she was shaken by the level of poverty and lack of opportunity she saw there and calls it a life-changing trip for her.

"You have to have a base assumption that every person on this earth has an equal right to opportunity and to live a dignified life," she said.

In many ways, Erickson has been groomed for the kind of work she's now doing.

She's the daughter of Dr. Joel Erickson, a Sonoma County cardiologist. Her mother, Karen, is a former physical therapist who now is a full-time community volunteer. She is on the board of directors of several nonprofits, including the Community Action Partnership, the Volunteer Center of Sonoma County and the Sonoma County Medical Alliance.

Erickson has been a recipient of Santa Rosa's Merit Award for Youth Service, The Press Democrat Youth Service Scholarship and the Volunteer Center Youth Service Scholarship.

Erickson left Sunday for eastern U.S. cities where FORGE has bases of operations, including Pittsburgh and Boston. She returns to Africa in April.

FORGE is an official operating partner of the United Nations refugee agency. Erickson's group often works with other established organizations such as CARE, Sisters of Charity and the International Organization for Migration.

The organization has programs in three different refugee settlements in Zambia, including the Meheba Refugee Settlement in northwestern Zambia. FORGE projects also are found in the Mwangi Camp and Kala Camp, located in the northeastern section of Zambia.

Many of the refugees are fleeing war-torn zones and cannot return to their homes, Erickson said. At Meheba, the refugee population is 60 percent Angolan.

The rest are Congolese, Sudanese, Rwandan and Burundese.

"People are realizing the need and the difference between our standard of living and that of the majority of the world's population," she said. Doing nothing about it, she said, is inexcusable.

You can reach Staff Writer Martin Espinoza at 521-5213 or mespinoza@pressdemocrat.com.