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Students teaming up to send aid, goodwill, volunteers to Africa

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In 2003, Kjerstin Erickson, then a Stanford student, sailed around the world on Semester at Sea. Her travels, coupled with the passionate students she met onboard the ship, gave her an idea.

She wanted to help African refugees, and she wanted to make a program where college students could do it on their own.

"All too often today's college students have to sit on the sidelines and learn about problems when they have so many resources to help them," Erickson said.

Her idea has grown into FORGE --- Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment --- an international non-governmental organization and partner of the United Nations.

FORGE has bases at Stanford, UCLA, Pittsburgh and in Boston. At each location, students come together and train to become ambassadors who travel to refugee camps in Africa.

This summer, Pittsburgh is sending seven ambassadors to Zambia for three months. For seven months, each member has been studying and planning their respective projects so that their time at the refugee camp, Kala, can be used effectively.

"As opposed to a normal volunteer program, FORGE is more intensive and demands so much more of its ambassadors," Erickson said. "Our focus is on creating real change on the ground."

Pitt students Ellie Ott and Eric Verprauskus are two of the ambassadors. They are teaming up to implement an educational program at the camp.

After speaking with FORGE alumni during their weekly meetings, the two decided that the demand for new library books and computers should be atop their priority list. The only problem may be getting the books to Zambia.

"We might have to bribe some people to get them there," Ott said. "I'm bringing very little clothing, mainly just supplies. But hopefully we can ship the other books."

Their program will also focus on special education and implementing a mentoring program.

"A lot of people drop out of school as they get older," she said, "especially the women."

Ott hopes that by pairing primary and secondary school students together they will feed off each other, and the older students will serve as positive examples for their younger counterparts. She wants to prepare them for the future.

"[The refugees] are without a country, without a voice," Ott said. "The idea of FORGE is to empower the refugees themselves so if they return to their countries, they have the power and knowledge to make their country better."

Verprauskus hopes he will not only be teaching the kids in the camp, but he will be learning a thing or two himself.

"We're a little more interconnected than we think sometimes," he said. "It's important to see it for ourselves and come up with our own opinions and come back and tell people about it."

Genevieve Barrow, a Pitt employee and student at the Graduate School of Public Health, is creating a program that focuses on health care. She wants to narrow in on women's reproductive health and HIV and AIDS awareness and education.

"I want to do an assessment of health-care needs and improve access to the available health-care facilities within the camp," she said.

And Barrow has a special perspective --- she grew up in Liberia. This will be her first return trip since 1992.

"I'm familiar with the stories [in Africa] because I probably have witnessed those same things," she said. "So I've just become able to relate, and I can really understand the conditions they face."

Meredith Hutchison, a Pitt sophomore, is another ambassador. Her project will implement a creative arts program. Along with plays and theater projects, she will establish a student-run newspaper for secondary school students.

"I hope that my project will kind of enrich the lives of these children and help them build conflict resolution and leadership skills, a sense of community and help them realize where they fit in as global citizens," Hutchison said. "And I hope they have a lot of fun."