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SOMERVILLE

# Out of an African refugee camp, an idea, and cause, emerge

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The Meheba refugee camp in Zambia, home by recent estimate to 18,000 Africans, most fleeing civil war, surprised Damon Luloff.

When the Boston University student spent last summer volunteering there, some of the residents asked him to teach them a class in grant-writing. They came from cities, some had attended college, and as transient as life was at the camp, they had plenty of ideas for how to make it better.

Before he returned home to Somerville, he taught a quick class for a handful of residents at their request.

"I told them everything I could tell them in four hours. They stayed for six hours, until the sun was going down, writing these proposals," he said.

Once back home, Luloff started thinking of that course as a model. He considered other ways refugees at the camp could empower themselves, and developed a program for his graduate school

thesis.

This summer, Luloff will return to Meheba to put into practice his idea, which he named Project for African Community Empowerment. His thesis didn't require him to actually execute the project, just plan it. But he thought that would be a waste of a good idea.

On Saturday, he is holding a bike ride to raise money for the project, which will cost \$12,000. Each rider must raise at least \$200 for the "Ride for Refugees" through suburbs northwest of Boston.

Luloff, 28, said he will be leading a series of workshops to teach residents of the camp how to identify community problems that cause suffering and contribute to poverty. He will teach how to address those issues, from ways to get funding to developing skills for managing projects. He plans to recruit community leaders — including women, who are often left out of key discussions — to participate in the workshops.



Damon Luloff with Meheba camp residents.

Among the issues he thinks leaders may want to address is the prevalence of prostitution — and thus the spread of AIDS — in the camp. Residents are also concerned that many children are not attending school because, while it is theoretically free, textbooks and uniforms are prohibitively expensive.

Andy Winig, an Arlington business owner, became interested in the fund-raising

ing ride when he heard Luloff speak at the Arlington Rotary Club. Winig said he was struck by the similarities between Luloff's Zambia program and Rotary's youth leadership award program. "We're doing the same thing," Winig said.

Winig, who runs a leadership training and corporate team-building business, said he took the opportunity to get a new bike and get back into riding. Two weeks before the event, he said he had already surpassed the fund-raising minimum.

Luloff leaves in June for Zambia, where he will lead a group of nine undergraduates he recruited and trained to work with the nonprofit FORGE, an international development organization founded by a Stanford University student in 2003 that is sponsoring both programs.

The northwestern Zambian camp is largely home to refugees from Angola, with smaller numbers from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Somalia, and Uganda, according to the

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, under whose auspices the camp is run. Many are fleeing civil war.

After two months working on the group project, Luloff will launch his own project. A native of Iowa, Luloff lived in Africa after he finished his undergraduate degree, working for the Peace Corps in Guinea.

Christine DiBuono, a Luloff colleague at the Writers Express, a Somerville nonprofit where he is a grant writer, said she and her husband are planning to ride on Saturday. Having also spent time in Africa with the Peace Corps, she shares many of Luloff's interests and was impressed with how quickly he pulled the ride together. "I'm really excited to just hear how the pilot project goes," she said.

Luloff said he originally thought of the bike ride as a fund-raiser, but quickly realized it was also a way to network and to meet people with similar interests.

For information about Ride for Refugees, go to [www.forgeprogram.org/rfr.htm](http://www.forgeprogram.org/rfr.htm).