

## Student gives summer to Zambian refugees

By LAUREN DALEY, *Standard-Times staff writer*

MARION — Step aside, Bono.

SouthCoast has its own good-will ambassador to Africa.

Ben Kneppers, 21, of Marion, has given up his summer vacation from Northeastern University to teach AIDS awareness at an African refugee camp, called the Meheba Settlement.

"I was always taught that if you have the ability to do something positive, it's your responsibility to take action," said the mechanical engineering major.

The Meheba Settlement is located in the northwestern province of Zambia. It was created in 1971 in order to accommodate the refugees who were fleeing the colonial and civil wars in Angola.

Mr. Kneppers will leave for Zambia on June 13 with eight other college students — from Northeastern, Boston University and Harvard — as an ambassador of the FORGE program.

FORGE (Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth & Empowerment) was founded in 2003 by Stanford University student Kjerstin Erickson. It was founded on the belief that western university students are the greatest untapped allies in the struggle for international development.

Each ambassador creates his or her own projects to head up. Mr. Kneppers will use his engineering background to create a source of electricity to power computers at the refugee library. He will also work with the refugee soccer team to promote AIDS and HIV awareness.

"I teamed up with the local men's soccer team, the Meheba Tigers — they're like the Red Sox of Meheba. I made a deal with them: I'll supply them with new soccer equipment if they're willing to become trained HIV educators," Mr. Kneppers said.

"Some of them play barefoot, so I'll supply them with gear, cleats, soccer balls. I have four boxes of goods and donations."

Before departing to Africa, FORGE ambassadors spend six months in training and fundraising.

Mr. Kneppers said he received a donation of soccer balls from the students at his old high school, Bishop Stang, after he gave a speech there.

Mr. Kneppers second project is creating a bicycle generator to power a computer lab for the refugees.

"Electricity is extremely limited and really expensive, so we've come up with a couple of techniques of supplying human power electricity. I'm buying a generator and setting up a stationary bike, because we need electricity for laptops for the refugees."

He said two other FORGE ambassadors will head up a creative writing class for the refugees this summer.

"Ben is very interested in service and involved in helping people. This is a wonderful opportunity for him," said Peter Woloschuk, a communications and journalism professor at Northeastern.

"I hope he gets out of this an insight into the needs of others, and the inter-connectedness of us all," he said.

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