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The journey begins

East Rockaway graduate heads to Africa

BY MIKE SCHNITZEL

After a journey that began with his selection as an ambassador for a program known as FORGE earlier this year, East Rockaway resident and Northeastern University sophomore Pete D'Aleo will finally be taking a trip he has dreamed of for the past six months -- to the Meheba refugee camp in Zambia.

D'Aleo is among a group of 12 students who were selected to make the trip to help the refugees living in Meheba, one of the largest refugee camps in the world. FORGE stands for Facilitating Opportunities for Refugees. "I'm a little nervous, but excited that it's finally happening," said D'Aleo, who left for Zambia on Wednesday. "I've been waiting for this for a long time."

Originally, D'Aleo and his project partner, Nayeli Vivanco, who recently graduated from Northeastern with a degree in economics, planned on teaching refugees how to run a small business baking and selling bread, which, D'Aleo explained, is a food that is culturally acceptable to the diverse array of ethnicities in the camp. Those plans have now changed.

"We figured out that the project would fail because of the high cost of flour and yeast," said D'Aleo. "Rather than going with a project we knew would fail, we decided to use microfinance to help refugees run their own small businesses."

Microfinance involves the use of small loans to help start businesses. D'Aleo said that the FORGE program would have \$5,000 available to lend to refugees to help them start up their businesses. The loans could range from \$60 to \$150, he said.

"We have designed a curriculum that will teach the refugees business fundamentals," said D'Aleo. "Some of these people don't know what a profit is, because it doesn't exist in their culture. Ideally we want to help the refugees achieve self-sufficiency and repatriation [to their home countries]."

D'Aleo will be at Meheba for 68 days. There he will help run the small-business workshop for five weeks, and then observe how the businesses actually run for the next month, trying to determine what works and

THE FORGE PROGRAM

FORGE -- Facilitating Opportunities for Refugees -- was founded in 2003 by Stanford University student Kjerstin Erickson for the purpose of using college students from western countries as "a mechanism to mobilize and harness the potential of youth as catalysts of social change," according to a statement on the program's Web site.

THE HOW-TO'S OF RUNNING A SMALL BUSINESS

Pete D'Aleo has been working for months with his project partner, Nayeli Vivanco, to design a curriculum to teach refugees at the Meheba refugee camp in Zambia how to run a successful small business. The following are elements of the curriculum that D'Aleo and Vivanco will teach the refugees.

- Fundamental skills of leaders and followers
- Basic accounting skills
- The basics of entrepreneurship
- The concept of profit (which is an alien concept to some of the cultures in the refugee camp)

what doesn't. D'Aleo said he will then incorporate any necessary changes into the curriculum.

"One of the things that I'm most excited about is that a documentary will be made about this to find what kind of businesses succeed, what kind of businesses fail, and how [different businesses] are run," he said, explaining that the documentary would be the basis for

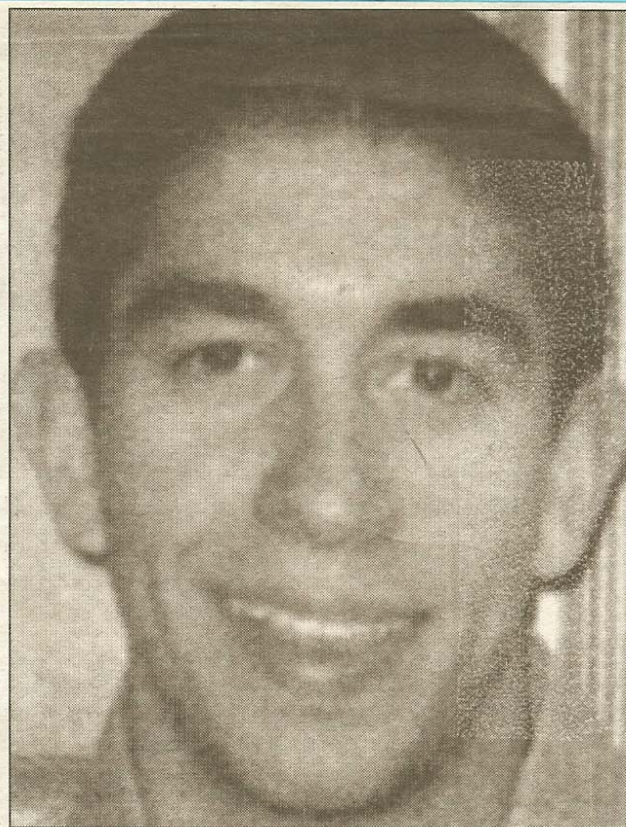


Photo Mike Schnitzel/Herald

PETER D'ALEO will help refugees learn the fundamentals of running a small business.

a case study that Northeastern Prof. Dennis Shaughnessy would write, which would then be published.

The Meheba refugee camp is in northwestern Zambia, 75 miles from the nearest town, Solwezi. According to a report released in December 2003 by the World Refugee Academy, a United Nations-supported not-for-profit organization, there are approximately 32,000 refugees in the 700-square-kilometer camp. Some two-thirds of them are from Angola, but significant numbers are from Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. There are no paved roads or phone lines - all of the camp's electricity comes from generators, and all communication is by radio.

For weekly updates on D'Aleo's Meheba refugee entrepreneur project will be available on his Web site, <http://forgeafrica.blogspot.com>.

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