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PEOPLE

## Forging ahead

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By Paul Kandarian | July 6, 2006

Many a college student on summer break might work hard and party just as hard, or do nothing at all. **Ben Kneppers** of Mattapoisett made other plans.

This summer, Kneppers, in his fifth year at Northeastern University, is teaching AIDS awareness at an African refugee camp, the Meheba Settlement in Zambia, created in 1971 for refugees fleeing colonial and civil wars in Angola.

During an eight-week stay that began in mid-June, Kneppers is an ambassador in a student-run program called FORGE, or Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment, founded in 2003 by a friend, Stanford University student Kjerstin Erickson.

"FORGE is very grass-roots, all student-run through our own fund-raising; we each had to raise \$4,500 to be an ambassador," said Kneppers before he left on the sojourn with seven other ambassadors, all college students from the Boston area. "My main thing is increasing AIDS awareness. I made a deal with the local men's soccer team [in Africa]: If I supplied them with new equipment, they'd come train as educators in AIDS, and become educators themselves at the local high school."

Kneppers has come through on his end, having received a donation of soccer balls from his high school, Bishop Stang, in North Dartmouth. The mechanical engineering student planned to carry out another project at the settlement: setting up human-powered generators for small amounts of electricity with which to run computers and provide lighting.

"We'll connect some people to stationary bikes, wire the bikes to batteries for a new computer lab in the village, where [FORGE] built the largest library in the refugee community," he said. "It'll give the kids a light source and provide power to the equipment in the lab."

In the co-op program at Northeastern, Kneppers has spent past summers working at a biomed company in Ireland and in Southern California. This is a more satisfying endeavor, he said.

"It's the opportunity of a lifetime to help some of the people who need the most help in the world," he said. "I can't find anything more worthwhile to do with my summer. It's much more rewarding than going on vacation."