

Zambia's Leading Debate - Based Newspaper

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*& Digest*

## Refugee growth and empowerment

By *Mercy Mulenshi*

**FACILITATING Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment (FORGE) is an organisation that was founded to create opportunities for refugees in various camps to develop their capacities for empowerment.**

Working as an official operating partner of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), FORGE mobilizes and harnesses the potential of young people as pioneers of social change.

The organisation has been doing this by creating space for the diversity of the youth in order to connect, collaborate, and innovate with them in response to a common cause.

And by providing them with the tools and training to do so effectively, FORGE not only delivers sustainable immediate impact in communities that need it most, but also empowers leaders of the future and unites them in pursuit of their vision. FORGE Executive Director Kjerstin Erickson said her passion in the formation of an organization whose focus is on the needs of refugees, springs from a commitment to global justice and to give and have more to offer than the traditional avenues are prepared to accept.

"Since FORGE was established three years ago, Botswana and Zambia are the only countries where I have worked. This is so because we target countries where there is stability and peace; as many may be aware it may prove impossible to set up a refugee camp where there is conflict", Erickson said. She said she opted to work with university and college students because they have a severe lack of effective channels for their energy, assets, and abilities, and the vast resource base of western university students all too often goes unrealised and untapped. Erickson said these resources have thus been dormant and fruitless, leaving the global community to suffer from the countless missed opportunities for positive action.

"And as FORGE, this is the existing tragedy we are trying to transform", she said. The organisation has been working with two primary programs with a focus on advocacy and that of working with

raise public awareness of critical global issues and build up the political resolve to address them.

Through grassroots campaigns and events, FORGE Advocates seek to personalize and humanize the experience of extreme poverty and marginalization so often faced by refugees and other ordinary human beings in extraordinary and intolerable circumstances.

"By empowering college students to educate and make a difference in the hearts and minds of people on the home front, the FORGE Advocacy Program is contributing to a massive concept shift towards

and have fundraised the money necessary to bring their plan to fulfilment".

Upon arriving in the camps, Ambassadors partner with refugees and the local community to ensure that the projects are local tailored, sustainable, and serve to develop leadership among the refugee youth. And for the sake of project oversight and management, FORGE keeps its staff in each camp for a 1 year.

This year, about nine students working in the Mwanze and K



Students from USA are also setting up recreation facilities in Kalambo and Mwanze Refugee Camps

Refugee Camps in the Northern Province of Zambia, which have a large Congolese population, were drawn from Stanford University and University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) to work with refugees in computer training programs, entrepreneurship, women empowerment, promotion of the arts and recreation. The students who have been paired to handle given projects include Meredith Bell, who is from Mwanze Team Leader, Katelyn Baldwin, Jolie Glaser, John Mulrow, Abby Speight, Julie Veroff, William Von Hoene, Lotte Goede and Tristan Reed. In an interview with the Ambassadors, Jolie and Jolie, who are working under the establishment of the Computer Literacy Centre, said this has been among the major initiatives being undertaken in the refugee camps as there is need to educate the community

compassion and unity, which is a vital shift of consciousness that will prove critical to the survival of the human race", Erickson said.

The Ambassador Program creates immediate, tangible impact in African refugee camps by implementing projects designed to educate, empower, and enrich the lives of young refugees.

The Ambassador Program utilizes a highly committed volunteer workforce and Erickson says, "Our FORGE Ambassadors represent the best of what today's university students have to offer the world. Before departing to Africa, FORGE Ambassadors spend six intense months in training going through the processes of education, social entrepreneurship, and fundraising. By the time they leave for their assigned camps, FORGE Ambassadors would have designed and developed

various technological advancements.

Tristan and Lotte undertaking a project under the Mwanze Entrepreneurship Institute said, "What we are doing is to carry out training in a number of entrepreneurship skills and thereafter give grants according to group needs in order to help them run their own projects", they said.

There are also projects working on the bridging communication gaps and barriers by formulating newsletters translated in the major languages in the camps, among them French. "We are also trying to make meaningful recreation in the camps so as to help work around the HIV/AIDS interventions through art creativity and soccer", William Katelyn and Abby said.