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Chelmsford teen making an impact

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CHELMSFORD -- Stephen Bottari Jr. knows teenagers like himself could help impoverished African residents turn their lives around and rebuild communities that were destroyed in civil wars.

For example, a library that an American charity built at a Zambian refugee camp turned a man who had read only two books in his life into a bookworm. Bottari does not believe humanitarian projects like the one could succeed without the advocacy work done by volunteers like him.

"A small group of dedicated people makes an impact" in countries thousands of miles away, he said.

Bottari, 17-year-old from Chelmsford attending Bishop Guertin High School in Nashua, is spending his summer advocating projects organized by Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment, or FORGE. The California-based organization mobilizes young volunteers across the country to share their knowledge and skills to make differences at African refugee camps.

When representatives from the group visited Bishop Guertin earlier this year, Bottari said he was impressed with the organization's record in improving the quality of Africans' lives. An editorial writer for his high-school newspaper, Bottari decided to join the FORGE team as a volunteer public-relations intern at the organization's office in Milford, N.H.

Since June, he has dedicated 10 to 12 hours per week, cranking out press releases and talking to news reporters. FORGE's projects range from creating sports leagues in camps to HIV/AIDS education to business seminars. Bottari's job is to raise awareness about ongoing efforts in Zambia and about "FORGE ambassadors" who stay at the refugee camps.

"News media is the best media in the world to get the news out," Bottari said. But even with the public-relations and public-speaking experiences through extra-curricular activities including Model United Nations, Bottari is finding out getting reporters' attention isn't that easy. It is important to contact reporters to follow up on the story ideas he pitched, Bottari said.

The internship also encouraged Bottari to learn more about the world -- and about himself. He learned about African geography and frequently visits humanitarian organizations' Web sites. He also tries to stay on top of foreign news. The teenager said he is coming out of his microcosm.

"I used to lump them (refugees) up into one category," but now know there are "individual stories and hardships," he said. "People in refugee camps have no hopes and things to look forward to," he said. "They are all stuck in one place and have no place to go."

Bottari said he hopes to continue his volunteer work with FORGE in fall.