

# SANTA ROSA

FALL  
2006

## HOLIDAY PREVIEW

Parties, caterers,  
gifts & tips for the  
coming season

## INTO AFRICA

Former beauty queen-  
turned-humanitarian  
KJERSTIN ERICKSON  
leads a refugee relief  
organization

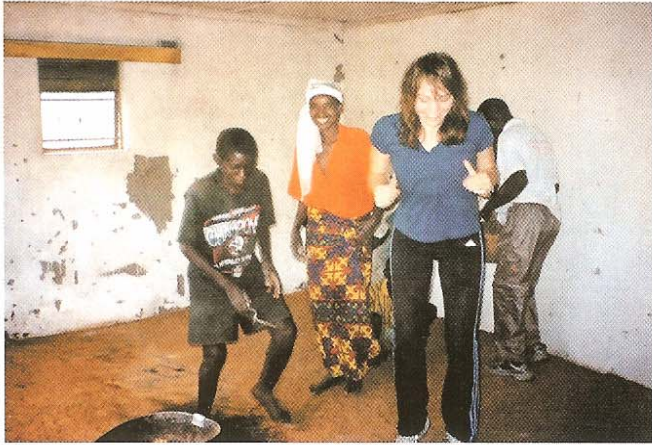
## CLASSIC COLONIAL

McDonald District standout is a home tour highlight

## FRONT-YARD FIX

A great garden grows out of unplanned events





Kjerstin Erickson set up Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment, providing educational support to three refugee camps in Zambia. Erickson's mother, Karen, shown at right with Meheba camp librarian Paul Ohissa and her daughter, visited in 2004.

## Learning by giving

A Santa Rosa native postpones her degree to head a relief organization in Zambia

STORY BY CHRIS COURSEY

**K**jerstin Erickson was well on her way to a degree in public policy and African studies at Stanford University when she found a place to get an even better education:

Africa.

It's a Saturday night in early September, and Kjerstin (pronounced "share-stin") is hard at work in her apartment in Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia. She's in between trips to refugee camps, using her "down time" to keep track of the budget, the programs, the staff and the 30 volunteer workers of a relief organization called FORGE — Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment.

At 23, she's young to be running what in human rights circles is known as an international NGO — a nongovernmental organization. But she knows the FORGE operation inside out because she created it.

The 2001 Santa Rosa High School graduate and former Miss Sonoma County left Stanford two years ago to devote all of her time to working with refugees from war-torn African nations.

On the advice of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, she set up shop

in Zambia, a relatively peaceful country that has become a haven in the middle of a continent torn by violence, poverty and despair.

FORGE operates in three refugee camps spread out across the mountains, rivers and swamps of a spectacular countryside made famous in the mid-1800s by the iconic British explorer, Dr. David Livingstone. As administrator of the far-flung program, she spends much of her time bouncing along "roads" that are almost as hard on the passengers as they are on the vehicles. But she loves the place that has become her home for half of each year.

"FORGE is well-known in the camps now; people know my name and I've made a lot of friends," says Kjerstin, who studied the Swahili language at Stanford. "The huge outpouring of appreciation is the best part of this job."

Operating on a \$300,000 budget — almost half of which is raised individually by the 30 college-age volunteers who form the backbone of the program — FORGE focuses on educational projects. It has created the largest library of any refugee camp in the world at the Meheba camp, the Zambian home of tens of thousands

of Angolan refugees for the past 35 years. It has established a solar-powered computer center in the Mwange camp, home to 25,000 Congolese refugees. It operates reading programs, HIV-education classes, a women's center and mentoring programs within the camps.

"There are tons of kids everywhere, and the tragedy is there is so little education available to them, either in the camps or if they can return to their home countries," Kjerstin says. "We're trying to help them develop the tools to succeed here and when they go home."

The FORGE model utilizes the talent of American college students to establish programs within the camps, then pays camp residents to keep the programs going.

In 2004, her work earned her recognition as one of *Glamour* magazine's top 10 college women in the United States.

Kjerstin has a year of classroom work left before she gets her bachelor's degree. In the meantime, she says, "I'm learning a lot every day."

And she's getting an education that even Stanford can't match. ■