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Rethinking Refugees

Students partner with Africa's displaced.

AT 18, ZAINA HOPES to finish secondary school and become a midwife. But the discouraging reality is that she is stranded in Zambia, in a camp for Congolese refugees who fled civil war at home.

"What am I supposed to do if I'm not able to go to university?" Zaina asked senior Julie Veroff last summer. "My whole life will be spent here in Mwange or back in the Congo, sitting around some water pump, or in front of my house, just gossiping about other people."

Veroff, an international relations major, hired Zaina as her Swahili translator when she taught a women's leadership and empowerment program at Mwange Refugee Camp, as a volunteer for FORGE (Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment). Every day the 30 women in the class chose a social issue to discuss—early pregnancies, early marriages, domestic violence.

"One afternoon I asked someone to speak for five minutes, while another woman listened and tried to paraphrase what she was saying," says Veroff, who will study development at Oxford University next fall on a Rhodes Scholarship. "The woman said, 'That's the first time I've ever been able to talk for five minutes without anyone interrupting me.'" In a culture that tends to keep wives subservient to their husbands, Veroff notes that encouraging women to analyze their own lives helps them realize that they can change their society, in Mwange and back in their homeland.

FORGE founder Kjerstin Erickson, a senior, says that's what separates her organization from other nonprofit nongovernmental organizations that operate as partners with UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency—the belief that refugees themselves are an untapped resource in the struggle for peace and stability in Africa.



FORGING AHEAD: Erickson helps refugees make the most of their exile.

Courtesy Kjerstin Erickson

"UNHCR is incredibly busy and understaffed, and doesn't have money for what FORGE does," adds Erickson, who is majoring in public policy and stopped out to start FORGE. "They appreciate us bringing into the camps what otherwise wouldn't be there."

This academic year, eight student project facilitators from Stanford and eight each from Boston- and Los Angeles-area colleges have been putting in 10 or more hours of study and preparation each week for the projects they will launch this summer in three refugee camps. Some will teach community health or HIV/AIDS prevention courses, while others build libraries and computer centers or administer microfinance loans, all in an effort to help refugees develop skills for their eventual repatriation. Because they can't leave their camps and are prevented from taking jobs in surrounding Zambian villages, FORGE also employs some 60 refugees year-round to continue the programs started by each summer's crop of idealistic students.

FORGE participants raise \$5,000, of which \$1,000 is devoted to their project and the rest to cover their expenses, including transportation, food and housing. On her first trip to Zambia last summer, Veroff flew to Lusaka and then traveled by car for two days to Melu's Village, her home base for work in Mwange. She woke with the local roosters, walked an hour each way to the camp, taught all day and, without electricity to light evening activities, was in bed early most nights. Except when she wasn't flushing out threatening cobras with bonfires.

Although students have been able to win small grants from the Haas Center for Public Service and from the Program in Feminist Studies, FORGE depends on individual donors to make their operating budget (\$290,000 in 2006). Erickson says that 97 percent of incoming funds go directly to services on the ground, with only 3 percent devoted to overhead expenses.