

MISSOURIAN

Student reaches out to assist Zambian women

BY EMILY RISTOW

May 15, 2007 | 12:00 a.m. CST

When Ashish Premkumar was 16, his teacher Matt Cone talked to him about a Noam Chomsky book, "Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance." Premkumar took such an interest that he immediately asked Cone to lend it to him.

"He was really impatient about it almost," said Cone, a social studies teacher at Rock Bridge High School. "I think he had realized what we all realize at some point: There are all these ideas out there, and I don't really know anything about them. He knew there was a greater world out there, and he wanted to do something about it."

That drive for accomplishment is one of the reasons that Premkumar, now 19, will spend June through August in Zambia working at the Meheba refugee camp, where he will lead a women's empowerment project. The effort will teach refugees at the camp's women's center how to earn money and provide for themselves.

"The basic premise is that you don't just help people, you help stabilize their lives by giving them programs that then they can take control of," he said.

Premkumar became interested in the project when he saw a flier in his dorm at Boston University for the organization Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment and decided to check it out. He'd been interested in global issues for a while, participating in the Model United Nations and starting a global issues club at Rock Bridge.

Premkumar's interest in global issues expands to his career goals. He is in an accelerated medicine program at BU with the goal of one day being a doctor in Africa or Asia. Joining FORGE and working in Africa seemed like a natural step for him.

"I've been thinking about going to Africa for a while," he said. "This is a good opportunity."

Cone said he was not surprised when Premkumar told him he was going to Africa this summer.

"I think he'll be perfect for it," Cone said. "He has a huge amount of drive, and he'll give a lot to the program."

FORGE is a U.N. partner organization beginning its fourth year of operation at refugee camps in Africa.

"It's a small organization," Premkumar said. "It's still in its infancy, but it has the potential to be very big. It's pretty exciting, what we'll be doing."

Premkumar and his friend Leah Reitz, a student at Tufts University, have combined their ideas and resources with those of the women at the camp to come up with a two-fold project to execute this summer. They plan to build a nut sheller that the women can rent out in the hope they can become economically stable. The second part of the project will be educational, covering reproductive health and sexual-based gender violence.

Funding for the project comes from donations and grants to FORGE.

Ashish Premkumar's mother, Priti Premkumar, said she was surprised to learn about his plans.

"He actually told us last fall when he came home for Thanksgiving break," she said.

"They were a little apprehensive, but I think they're probably OK with it now," Ashish Premkumar said of his parents.

"I'm sure it's like a life experience for him," Priti Premkumar said. "He will learn how the other side of the world is and how people live. That's what he really wants to experience. We are also going to learn along with him. When he comes back and talks about it, we will learn."

Premkumar said his perception of the project has changed.

"I really kind of expected my work out there to be 'Oh yeah, I can just go there and make a difference,'" he said. But after talking with other FORGE members, researchers and professors, he sees the task as "really, really daunting. Everything about it, from understanding who I'll be trying to help to how my actions will be interpreted by the community, just things I'd never thought about, things I take for granted."

After his summer in Zambia, Premkumar said the demands of BU will prevent him from returning to Africa for a couple of years. But he said he'd be there to offer new FORGE members support and advice.

"He really wants to make a difference," Cone said. "He is not simply letting the world come to him."