

Students will teach skills to refugees in camps in Africa



Photo by KEN MCGAGH

Leah Reitz, 19, of Framingham, will be spending the summer in Zambia volunteering for the non-governmental organization FORGE.

By Liz Mineo

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Framingham -

Sophomore college students Leah Reitz and Rhianon Liu hope to make a difference in the lives of many people during their two-month stay in a refugee camp in Africa. They also expect the experience to change their own lives.

Reitz, a Framingham resident attending Tufts University; and Lui, who lived in Weston before going to Stanford University, will work on projects of their own creation they presented to become volunteers with FORGE, a United Nations partner organization.

Reitz will work in a refugee camp in Zambia, where around 14,000 people from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Burundi and Rwanda have settled after fleeing war and political upheavals in their countries. Liu will work in another camp which has close to 20,000 who hail mainly from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Reitz's project is to create a women's empowerment center that can offer information on reproductive health, sexual abuse prevention, and training on income-generating activities to help women take charge of their lives, she said.

Lui's project is to revamp a library, set up a children's center, and offer training courses, clubs and workshops — resources that will empower refugees by connecting them to educational resources, she said.

After being accepted as volunteers with FORGE, an organization founded four years ago by a Stanford University student, Reitz and Lui had to go through several months of training, education and development. And now, they're ready to go and put in practice what they have learned.

"It's going to be a pretty positive experience," said Reitz. "I heard that many students come back changed from the trip to Africa. Many want to change their studies or work in Africa."

Lui shares the sentiment.

"It's meaningful work," she said. "It's not a study-abroad program. It required hard work on our part. You had to present a project to be accepted, and now we'll be in charge of managing the project and achieve our goals."

For Reitz, whose parents lived in Colombia as Peace Corps volunteers in the 1970s, the experience of going to Africa will be an attempt to follow in her parents' steps. For Lui, the trip to Africa will be a trip to a somewhat familiar place. Lui's cousins are half-Kenyans, and she traveled to Kenya for a safari trip when she was 14.

But this time, it would be different, said Lui, not only because it's a worthwhile cause, but because it will be challenging.

"I've never undertaken a project like this," she said. "It'll be a personal challenge not only because I'll be living and working in a foreign place, but because I'll be responsible for my project."

Taking part in efforts to help Africa is an activity that draws many college students across the country. Summing up the feelings of many of her peers who want to make an impact on the world, Reitz wrote in her statement, "Framingham, and America itself, were founded on individuals harnessing resources, taking initiative, and building sustainable business. We want to be part of that on the African continent."

These days, Reitz and Lui are preparing for their trip raising money to pay for the airfare, stay and living expenses. Each volunteer needs to raise \$5,000 because, according to its Web site, FORGE devotes more than 90 percent of its money to projects helping refugees in Africa. It has helped 70,000 refugees so far.

In explaining why the organization focuses on refugees, its founder, Kjerstin Erickson, 23, said in a written statement, "Refugees have staggering desire, drive and capability, and the kind of native knowledge that westerners don't.

"While their home countries are at war, refugees often have little to do but wait. But when paired with the resource-rich and experienced workers that FORGE has on our team, refugees can gain the skills and backing they need to build when they return home."

Those interested in helping the organization can check the Web site www.FORGENOW.org, or send checks to P.O. Box 14425, Santa Rosa, CA 95402.

Those interested in helping Reitz and Lui can contact them at leah.reitz@tufts.edu and rhanon@stanford.edu.