



Kjerstin Erickson, Founder & Executive Director of FORGE, in front of Kunachi Preschool with students.
Photo by Emily Flynn

A long way from summer camp - Building hope for refugees in Settlement

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How much can a few college students really accomplish during two months in Africa?

Turns out, quite a lot.

After graduating from Harvard last year, Annelisa Pedersen '06 headed off to a refugee camp in northeastern Zambia to participate in a program run by U.S.-based FORGE (Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth & Empowerment). There, she worked with an isolated community of orphans and elderly people called "the vulnerables," many of whom had chronic illnesses, ranging from leprosy to epilepsy.

The then-21-year-old's mother was none too pleased about Pedersen's decision to travel to the Meheba refugee settlement, where only months before there had been an outbreak of cholera.

But for the Atlanta-raised music and English student who had never before visited a developing country, the summer in Sub-Saharan Africa was "a completely life-changing experience."

At the settlement, which consists of about 14,000 refugees from Angola, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Pedersen raised enough money to build a preschool and a farm to help feed the more than 200 people in this isolated community within Meheba. The preschool now employs three teachers and enrolls more than 90 students.

"There were so many challenges every step of the way," Pedersen said, referring to corruption in Zambia and the settlement's lack of resources and infrastructure. "It's a miracle it happened at all."

This summer, Pedersen will return to Meheba to help supervise 10 volunteers, including three Harvard students: Michelle Cho '10, Sabrina Forte '08, and 25-year-old Vaughn Hester, a graduate student in the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH). (Other volunteers attend Tufts, Northeastern, and Boston universities.) Since January, the students have been meeting weekly to discuss issues related to Angolan, Rwandan, and Congolese refugees; international development; cultural sensitivity; and fundraising.

Cho and Forte have taken on one of the "riskier" projects, according to Forte. They are raising money to buy a flatbed truck to help refugee farmers transport crops such as cabbage, sweet potatoes, and carrots to the nearby city of Solwezi and the country's capital Lusaka. Outside the camp, these farmers will be able to garner a fair price for their products — earning three to four times what they would otherwise. Because of the shoddy roads and unreliable cars, the project "could be made or broken by the quality of the vehicle or one good or bad mechanic," Forte said.

A portion of the proceeds from the transportation project will go toward a FORGE scholarship fund to help refugee students attend primary and secondary schools.

Anticipating her travels in June, Forte said, "There's no way someone can go to a place like Africa and not want to help or recognize the need to help. No one goes to a place like that and says the system is fair and these people aren't victims of circumstance beyond their control."

HSPH's Hester is working to combat HIV/AIDS in Meheba through education campaigns. She will work with such groups as a popular youth soccer league and is trying to secure thousands of rapid HIV tests that can be administered with a simple finger prick and can generate results minutes later.

Among her goals this summer? "To reduce the stigma of HIV even one iota."

"Each of the projects is trying to make a lot happen on a very limited budget," Hester said. (Budgets for the five FORGE projects in Meheba range from \$3,000 to \$7,000, and the projects include building a second preschool and providing vocational training and health education at a local women's center.) "It's incredibly grassroots. And I think that's good. I think simple solutions can be good," she said, adding that FORGE's guiding principles are "collaboration and cooperation. We work with refugees at every turn."

Harvard veterans of Meheba — including Susan Lieu '07, who worked on an HIV/AIDS project in 2005, Pedersen, and Aria Laskin '08, who helped open a computer center and taught peace education activities last year — praise their experiences at the settlement.

Describing a moral imperative she developed in Zambia, Lieu, whose parents are Vietnamese refugees, said, "I've inherited a sense of privilege because I go to a top university. I have a responsibility to these people. Injustice is everywhere. We must do something about it."

Pedersen, who has volunteered with refugees and immigrants in Boston as well as in Africa, said, "It was remarkable to me how much we romanticize what it is to be a refugee. They're just people like anyone else," she said, adding, "It sounds so cliché, but what I found most surprising was how easy it was for me to identify with the refugees we worked with, to feel a very close bond with them even though we have such different backgrounds."

What most impressed Laskin were the refugees themselves — in particular, their "incredibly strong faith in God, in human potential, and in each other."

