



From cars to refugee camps Local guy leads volunteer groups in Africa

By John "jaQ" Andrews jandrews@hippopress.com – 7 June 2007

Nick Talarico — yes, of the car dealership Talaricos — is deviating a bit from what his dad might have planned. After graduating from college in 2002, he worked for a little while at the dealerships, but sold his car and house to become the operations director of FORGE (www.forgenow.org), a nonprofit organization that sets up libraries and other services in refugee camps in Zambia.

Q: Can you tell me exactly what you'll be doing in Africa?

I will hit the ground on June 5 at 6 a.m. and spend that day and the next day buying supplies. I'll immediately head up, it's like a 10-hour drive, to one of our camps called Meheba. ... From there ... I'll head straight to Mwange camp, which is another 20-some-hour ride ... and set up another solar system at that house. ... Then I get down to the capital city of Lusaka and I'll pick up our first team [of volunteers] and I'll bring them to Meheba. It's pretty much that schedule the rest of the summer, just rotating the teams. By the time the last one comes in and they're oriented, it's time to bring the first team out.

So you're [a manager] of those teams?

Yeah.

What are the teams trying to accomplish?

There are three teams. There's one [based in] L.A., one in Stanford and one in Boston, made up almost completely of college students.... it's an acceptance rate of like 20 percent, so it's pretty competitive.

So there's no shortage of people who want to do this?

No, no. And we try to make it something that not everybody would want to do. There's a \$5,000 fundraising minimum, there's I think 500 and some odd hours of total training ... These are kids that already have full class loads and part-time jobs, so it takes a lot of dedication ... they start as these green yet passionate people in November, and by June, they are ... prepared to go live in a refugee camp for two months and work hand-in-hand with refugees ... Past projects have included four or five libraries ... three computer centers ... women's empowerment initiatives, community sports leagues that focus around AIDS education. This year, a really cool thing is repatriation centers, because all of our Congolese refugees are going to be going home to DR [Democratic Republic of] Congo by the end of '08, beginning of '09.

...The impetus behind FORGE ... is to give refugees the education, the tools ... to effectively and peacefully rebuild their countries when they go back home. ... While their nations are warring and many people are dying, they're forced to kind of sit and wait in refugee camps without any resources, any access to higher education — the United Nations does provide for primary school — and then they go back home. And ... everybody looks to these refugees to rebuild, but they've been gone for six, seven years and they don't have the tools or skills necessary to properly rebuild.... That's where FORGE comes in, because we don't do the food or the protection, the things that the UN does do. We do this kind of stuff.

So are you one of a bunch of NGOs working with these populations?

Yeah, but we're the only one that does what we do. The UN, the way they set it up is, they kind of sub-contract all their work. Red Cross obviously does health in the camp. World Vision will do building in the camp. Right to Play will do food distribution and exercise, sports leagues. FORGE comes in and United Nations loves us because they don't have to pay us anything. [Our teams] might be college kids for the most part, but after seven-plus months of training, they know what they're talking about. ... Our computer centers run a full course load every day of the week, except for Sundays, every week of the year, and every single course has a line waiting outside. ... I'll go to my public library in Milford and it'll be empty — stacks of books and empty computers. You go to your public library in the refugee camp and the second that thing opens, there are kids waiting outside that door trying to get in. It's pretty inspiring.

Everybody's a volunteer, right?

Refugees are paid, refugee staff members. ... We'll implement the projects hand-in-hand with the refugees ... they have to be culturally tailored and they have to be sustainable projects. After that two-month period, the refugees take over completely. We do pay the refugees. It's anywhere between \$40 and \$50 a month, which is slightly above the camp average for skilled labor.

You credit growing up in the Talarico empire, I guess, as helping you with this. How does one translate to the other?

I cut my teeth with some hard-core businessmen [to whom] the only thing that mattered was the bottom line. They had hearts, but at the end of the day, if they had to make a decision, they made the decision based on the bottom line. Now, FORGE's bottom line is not incoming money, but we do have a bottom line, and that is the benefit to the refugees. At the end of the day, we have to make a decision about how we feel about a staff member or a project that's kept floundering that is best going to benefit refugees in the long run. It translates very well.