

Coronado grad helps refugees fight HIV

By Ramón Rentería / El Paso Times

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Hester

Not very many college students spend the summer fighting a deadly disease.

But Vaughn Hester, 25, is helping to bring awareness and education about HIV/AIDS in a remote refugee camp in Africa.

"I'm excited and a little nervous. It's a completely new challenge for me," Hester said recently.

Hester, a 2000 graduate of Coronado High School, is studying population and international health in a master's program at Harvard University's School of Public Health.

She is spending nine weeks this summer as a volunteer at the Meheba Refugee Settlement in northwestern Zambia, Africa. She will develop and coordinate an AIDS education and outreach project for Forge, a United Nations partner organization dedicated to making life better for refugees.

Hester has also volunteered in the Dominican Republic. She raised \$5,000 for the project in Africa.

"I've seen what a very small group of people with limited resources can bring to a community," she said. "One of the most valuable contributions we can make is just bearing witness to these people's stories, understanding their lack of access to social services, and talking to them about their fears and concerns."

Hester will work with refugees and other groups to spread the word about HIV/AIDS and to encourage refugees to get tested and use contraception.

Hester honed her instincts for helping others as a younger woman concerned about the big economic disparities between Juárez and El Paso. So she set out to change the world in little steps.

"There's a lot of value just in advocacy," she said. "If I tell others what I'm doing, then someone else might pay attention to that part of the world and what we all can do to make a difference."