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Los Altos native heads to Africa



Victor Maccharoli / Daily News

Los Altos native Sabah Khan talks Friday about her plans to spend the next year in Zambia working in a refugee camp.
By Melanie Carroll / Daily News Staff Writer

The closest Los Altos native Sabah Khan has ever come to the Zambian refugee settlement where she's planning to spend 13 months was on her computer with Google Earth.

But that's not stopping the 24-year-old from chucking her routine and job in San Francisco for a chance to work with thousands of refugees in one of the world's poorest countries.

There won't be any running water there, and about a third of the people are HIV-positive. And there's a decent chance she could come down with malaria.

"I've lived without running water before ... at my grandmother's house in Pakistan," Khan said.

She tells her sometimes worried mother that by walking through San Francisco's Tenderloin district daily, she already encounters potentially tainted needles.

The University of Pennsylvania graduate, who works for the U.S. Department of Justice as a paralegal, said she yearned to do more hands-on public interest work.

That's where Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment, or FORGE, came into the picture. The nonprofit operates three programs at refugee camps in Zambia, the South African nation surrounded by the Democratic Republic of Congo; Tanzania; Malawi; Mozambique; Zimbabwe; Botswana; Namibia; and Angola - some of the most war-torn areas on the planet.

FORGE, created by Stanford student Kjerstin Erikson in 2003, aims to assist refugees and draw attention to their plight.

When Khan arrives at the settlement of 20,000 in July after a flight through Zambia's capital city Lusaka, she's not sure exactly what she'll do. She could end up teaching community health classes, working in a library or school, or helping refugees learn computer skills they can use before and after they return to their homelands. She starts training next month in Oakland and plans to quit her job in San Francisco at the end of this month.

But before she ships off to Africa, Khan needs to raise some money. FORGE participants are expected to come up with \$5,000, a fifth of which helps pay for their project. The rest goes toward transportation, food and housing. Khan hopes she can get 100 people to donate \$50 apiece. She even has a Web site for that purpose:

www.supportsabahatforge.org.
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