

Forging Ahead

by Bridget Doyle, September 2007

While some college kids vacate their parents' home after high school only to find themselves submerged in a life of partying and other indulgences, there are many who find inspiration and motivation to change the world in these precious years of their lives.

Alison Root, 2005 Naperville North graduate and current student at Stanford University, has taken an admirable path: She volunteers in rural Zambia in Africa in order to educate, inspire and assist refugees from war-torn countries to develop human-resource skills.

Looking for more than just a "typical service trip" for her summer, Root found a great deal of things about the program she chose, FORGE (Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth & Empowerment), that appealed to her agenda. FORGE is an organization based on the goals to help educate, empower and enrich the lives of refugees in order to catalyze sustainable social change. Started in 2003 by college students, FORGE creates individual projects for the volunteers based completely on the individual community's needs.

One of the things about FORGE that drew Root in was its accountability when it came to actually making a difference.

"It's really the only organization that I have encountered that strives to make a sustainable change by giving refugees the tools they need to make change," she says. "There are far too many programs that bring untrained young volunteers into situations in which they have no background and no training. While manpower is definitely on high demand, I think aiming for mutual growth and empowerment is the most important thing. Join an organization that responds to community need and works with the people instead of throwing money and Western notions of development at them."

While in Zambia this past summer, Root had the opportunity to focus in on a specific project with one other student volunteer to create a "reparation institute." The refugees in the area in Zambia where she was stationed are from the Democratic Republic of Congo and are slated to move back home in the upcoming year. Root and her partner set to implement an information branch as well as starting classes on leadership, personal finance skills and other skills to equip adults to enter back into the workforce. This is a concrete example of how the FORGE program not only assists refugees with their basic and immediate needs but also gives them the tools and skills to grow and succeed on their own.

In a light-hearted yet informative e-mail to family and friends, Root recounted the many interesting things she had encountered thus far, including all specifics from camp life. From kids following the volunteers around like paparazzi to endearing anecdotes about the family she lived with, no detail was spared. Although her diet limited and daily shower from a cold bucket and mug, Root continued to stay positive.

"Overall we are very inspired by everyone in the camp—all of the smiles and support—the refugees are so hungry for anything to do, everything to learn, so we are confident that we are making an impact," she wrote. "You should have seen the crowd around our signs and the amount of people signing up for our classes. We feel very loved."

For the future, Alison plans to get involved in the NGO (non-governmental organizations associated with the United Nations) and some of its fieldwork related activities. While initially planning to work in policymaking after college, her trip seemed to have quite an impact on her own personal plans.

"Putting human faces on international crises really changes the nature of the work" working a cubicle all the way back in the U.S. could have a significant impact, [but] being a liaison between the policymakers and people is something that is really invaluable."

Her message to Naperville residents? "We know we are quite fortunate to live in the second-best city in America, but there is a whole world out there that is waiting to be helped," Root says.

She continues to stress the importance of choosing to support an organization that responds to community needs instead of just pushing Western money and notions of development.