



Service that Changes Lives

The college's on-going relationship with the village of Nkuv in Cameroon exemplifies service-learning at its best.

In the four years since it began, the initiative—which is focused on water and health in Nkuv—has made a lasting difference not only to the community in Africa but at Hope as well.

“It gives us the opportunity to apply the ideas that students learn here in class in the world, such that it transforms the lives of the students and the community that we’re working in,” said Dr. Jeff Brown, an assistant professor of engineering who has helped coordinate the program since it began.

The connection started in 2006 as a project of the college's then-new chapter of Engineers Without Borders (EWB), but quickly became an interdisciplinary effort that now includes the nursing and education departments and has also drawn upon the expertise of other disciplines. In 2008, the program received statewide recognition as one of four finalists for that year's Carter Partnership Award presented by the Michigan Campus Compact.

Hope teams, students and faculty together, travel to the village for an extended stay each May, working to help implement plans developed during the preceding school year.

The initiative began with construction of “bio-sand” filters to help purify the community's water. The filters are three-foot-high poured-concrete towers filled with sand through which water is poured, removing impurities. The initial team in May 2006 trained the villagers in how to construct them, helping to build six.

The village now has 140 of the filters, almost all built by the community. Dr. Brown noted that involving and recognizing the villagers as participants and not as beneficiaries is a key component of the program.

“I focus on getting our students engaged with the community and making the case that if they don't approach the community at the very least as equal partners with knowledge and information that's absolutely critical to the long-term success of the project, then they're missing something,” he said. “It's important to



Students from multiple departments have an opportunity to make a lasting difference by working with the people of Nkuv, Cameroon, to help provide the village with clean water and to address a variety of issues related to community health. Here the group celebrates a tap stand that provides water via a newly installed pipeline.

let the community shape the final product and participate in determining what we need to do to make it work.”

Getting the water to Nkuv in the first place has long been a challenge. The average villager can spend anywhere between five and 20 minutes collecting one five-gallon bucket of water. The team and villagers have since developed and built a system for piping in the water, resulting in nine tap stands in the village.

Nursing students have been surveying the community's health, looking in particular at the incidence of water-borne diseases in children five and under. Even while noting that community health has improved since the addition of the filters, the team is also seeking to make a larger difference, emphasizing providing lessons in health education. Hope nursing and education students have been working together to help train a core group of women who through the village's established social networks can serve as advocates for community health.

Hope junior and engineering student Laura Petrasky of Marquette, Mich., has been involved in the project since her freshman year. In fact, the project was an important consideration in her college choice.

“That's one of the things that drew me to Hope,” Petrasky said. “At Hope I felt like instead of kids partying all the time, everyone's interested in volunteer work.”

Petrasky joined the EWB project because she was interested in working with and helping people, but she's noticed some benefits in her professional training. She's gained experience working in teams, has become more confident in making public presentations and has even had a chance to try grant-writing.

Especially, though, she's learned about making a difference.

“Something I've learned since I've been at Hope is that no matter what you go into, you can ‘change the world,’” she said. “Whatever job you have, what matters is how you apply it.”

Engineering major Tim Carter '09 even credits the EWB project with helping him find his post-Hope path. He's now working with Samaritan's Purse, helping to provide clean water for the people of Kenya.

“Engineers Without Borders provided me with the opportunity to use my Hope College education to help others,” he said. “Before joining EWB, I was struggling with how I could use my engineering degree to share God's love by assisting those in need. After traveling to Cameroon with EWB, I really felt God was calling me to engineering missions, which is now my career.”

“I feel it is very important that Hope College offers a variety of volunteer opportunities,” Carter said. “The mission of Hope College includes educating students for lives of service. It helps students to understand the importance of living a life in service to others, instead of yourself. Without the volunteer opportunities offered at Hope College, my life would be a lot different and much less fulfilling than it is today.”

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