

Museum image touted as end of poverty in Africa

UWO engineers are urged to build dreams as well as buildings.

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by Ronnie Shuker

Imagine a museum of poverty.

There's the last mosquito carrying malaria, the last foot-powered irrigation pump, the last home without electricity.

It's the building Parker Mitchell, co-CEO of Engineers Without Borders, hopes to one day construct, marking the end of poverty in Africa.

And he's asked members of the group's chapter at the University of Western Ontario to be help build that dream.

"To build that museum of poverty is going to require a lot of bricks," he said. "Each chapter and each individual can have a part in putting one of those bricks down in the foundation."

Mitchell, 31, spoke at the chapter's annual wine and dine event. He's a graduate of engineering and arts from the University of Waterloo and holds a master's in development studies from Cambridge. In 2005, he was voted one of Canada's Top 40 Under 40 emerging leaders by Time magazine.

Mitchell co-founded Engineers Without Borders in 2000. The organization brings agriculture, water sanitation and other technologies to developing communities in Africa.

"Technology will be part and parcel of any society's transformation and ability to take control of its own destiny," he said. "We look at the application of simple, appropriate technologies that will help people gain control of their lives in Africa."

While there's still a desperate need for food in much of Africa, there's no shortage of entrepreneurial spirit on the continent to help propel its technological development, Mitchell said.

In Cameroon, on one of his trips to Africa, Mitchell stood and watched as three young boys sped down a hill on a bicycle -- a universal childhood scene.

But this bike was made entirely out of wood. And the children made it themselves.

"It's unbelievably humbling that in six years of primary school, in six years of secondary school and five of engineering education that I couldn't even conceive of how to build a bike like that. And these kids had it working perfectly," he said.

"When I see that kind of natural ingenuity just struggling to break out against the confines nature has put on so many people in Africa, stories like that give me hope."

It's that hope Mitchell believes will one day lead to building the museum of poverty.

For him, it's a symbol that engineers can help build more than just buildings -- they can build dreams.