

Engineers Volunteer Overseas

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Although many students may say they want to do something to change the world, Engineers Without Borders is offering them the opportunity to do more than just talk.

With chapters all over the world, including McMaster, the organization provides professionals, students, and graduates from all faculties the chance to gain real-life experience in international development.

Third-year engineering student, Stephanie Liddel, was one of two McMaster students who were given this opportunity last summer. She spent four months volunteering with EWB in Southern Tanzania.

“I have always been interested in what life is like in other parts of the world and what I can do as a Canadian to help out,” said Liddel about her reasons for volunteering with EWB.

Liddel worked alongside the non-governmental organization Enterprise Works, helping to improve the design of the “hydro-ram pump.” This led to improved irrigation methods in a community where farmers were used to watering crops with buckets. Liddel spent four months living with this community and said she gained a unique perspective on development, and the insight to recognize feasible solutions for the community. Still, Liddel noticed locals looked to Westerners for technological help.

“They have this idea that Westerners know everything,” Liddel explained.

She said she believes misconceptions such as this result in a greater perceived dependence on external aid, and that technologies must be taught and implemented in ways that can be used at the local level, by local people.

Today Liddel is sharing her experience with others. She recently gave a talk on alternative energy sources to the McMaster EWB committee and has more conferences planned.

Although there are no Mac students volunteering abroad with EWB right now, starting next year the McMaster chapter plans to send two graduates from the University overseas to volunteer for one year. They also plan to send one undergraduate student abroad to volunteer for four months next summer.

Students who have graduated from university can volunteer with EWB for up to three years, while undergraduates can only volunteer for up to four months. The cost to send a student to volunteer with EWB is \$12,000. According to Brad Statham, vice president of the McMaster EWB chapter, students shouldn't be deterred by the cost.

“We don’t choose based on who can pay. We base it on the quality of the volunteer,” he said.

For students selected to volunteer, the cost is already covered. The national EWB office and the McMaster Engineering Society each provide \$6,000 in funding.

McMaster’s chapter of EWB recently received increased funding from their supporters, which traditionally includes the Canadian International Development Agency, McMaster University President Peter George, the Engineering Society, and fundraisers initiated by the chapter. This increase in funding can be credited to more awareness about the organization and its objectives.

“People are becoming more aware and becoming more receptive,” said fourth-year engineering student and EWB member Sura Abdul-Razzak.

Founded in 2000, EWB is the brainchild of engineers Parker Mitchell and George Roter. With more than 10,000 members, chapters in 22 Canadian universities, and over one million dollars fundraised in the past year; EWB is the fastest growing development organization in Canada.

EWB follows a five-tiered model that outlines the steps toward sustainable development. The model begins with projects implemented at the grassroots level, including water and sanitization, food production, and affordable energy technology. Volunteers then work directly with NGOs in host countries to develop and teach sustainable practices that will remain after the volunteer has left. The third component of overseas work focuses on empowering members of the host community by eliminating perceptions of dependence on developed nations.

But, the work of EWB is not limited to overseas projects. The fourth tier of the model involves volunteers educating those in their own communities about the present conditions and needs in developing communities.

In 2005, EWB volunteers throughout Canada will speak to 15,000 high schools through their outreach program, and use interactive games to teach them about inequality.

This outreach continues even in post-secondary classrooms. McMaster University is one of three Canadian universities offering a first-year engineering design course that incorporates EWB by challenging students to create a sustainable development project.

Susan Masten, director of first-year engineering, said she believes this program prepares students to meet the demands of their future clients.

“By using projects from EWB, the students have a chance to step out of their comfort zone and enter a society that may be very different than their own. They have to learn

how to determine and meet the needs of their clientele and how to be successful in this new environment,” she said.

The fifth and final component of the EWB model focuses on the self. This ensures that volunteers benefit from their experiences.

Students from all faculties are encouraged to participate in EWB activities. Past and current volunteers range from economists to anthropologists; all skill sets are welcome.

For those interested in getting involved, there is an open door meeting Nov. 21 at 6:30 p.m. in JHE 328. EWB is also hosting two guest lecturers: one on the role of policy in agriculture Nov. 24, and the second on biodiesel and Jatropha seeds on Nov. 30. Both lectures will be held at 7 p.m. in MDCL 3020.

Abdul-Razzak said he believes these events will appeal to anyone with an interest in international development.

“It’s a really exciting chapter to be a part of and a really fun way to learn about international development and channel your passion for it.”