



Aid | Borderless engineers

It's the kind of thing they don't teach you in engineering school: once you've built new sewage and clean-water facilities in a tiny west African community like, say, Bafoussam in Cameroon, then you have to instruct all the residents how to wash their hands. It's not enough just to work out where the latrines should be so they don't contaminate the drinking water. One thing leads to another, like one good turn. And this one started, improbably enough, in a Timothy's coffee shop in north Toronto in 2000. Two 23-year-old engineering grads from the University of Waterloo, Parker Mitchell and George Roter, chums starting out on their own careers, nonetheless felt there was something missing in their lives. So they came up with the notion of a volunteer development agency—Engineers Without Borders—and saw it consume their every working hour and carom through Canadian university campuses like a shot off a shovel.

In the past two years, this unique aid agency has spawned 20 university-based chapters, sent 40, mostly young engineers abroad to do good deeds, and captured the imagination of, well, engineers. About 2,500 new and retired professionals have signed on, and at least two professional bodies have taken formal and encouraging notice. The Canadian Council of Professional Engineers presented its first Student Gold Medal last year to EWB volunteer Sara Ehrhardt, a one-time aid cynic who almost single-handedly created the group's liaisons with other

Quebecer Ugo Lapointe teaching hand-washing to villagers in Cameroon

do-good organizations in the field.

Also taking notice is the Canadian International Development Agency—the group was to meet with CIDA minister Susan Whelan this week—and more help from that front would certainly ease the funding burden. To date it's been carried mostly by its volunteers (they contribute \$500 toward their own overseas work), Mitchell and Roter, who have chucked in \$27,000 of their savings, and a handful of private-sector angels, including Montreal businessman Ted Brockhouse, who wrote the organization three cheques totalling \$35,000.

He's getting his money's worth. So far the EWBs have built village-sized sanitation projects in Cameroon, set up a computer training centre in the Philippines with used equipment donated in Montreal, and helped a local group design an improved shea nut grinder in Burkina Faso, a big improvement over hand-grinding the high-fat nut so it can be sold to cosmetic companies for up-scale creams.

Mitchell and Roter run the show on a shoestring. Each overseas project costs EWB nearly \$5,000 a volunteer but the hidden cost, notes Mitchell, is that most of the volunteers are new graduates who are forgoing six months of income while their student debts pile up. Mitchell, who bunks in the Roter basement, says he is amazed at the uptake and the fact that so many Canadian engineers have such a social conscience. Who knew?