

HELP International comes to the rescue again

By Bethany Park *NewsNet Staff Writer* - 19 Apr 2001

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Motivated by a love for the people and the unique opportunity to serve, two BYU students will be spending six weeks in El Salvador and Peru to make a documentary for the nonprofit organization HELP International.

"It's not everyday you get this kind of opportunity. It gives a different perspective on life," said Spencer Arnsten, 24, a senior majoring in sociology from Houston, Texas.

Arnsten and Dave Cook, 25, a senior majoring in communication studies from Houston, both served missions with the Latin people where they developed a love for them that has kept them motivated for this project throughout difficulties.

"Financial is always an issue, but it's also easy to lose sight in how much these people need our help," Arnsten said. "I'm hoping to capture real peoples' stories ... to see the connection between us and them."

Tonight is a fundraiser at Maeser Elementary School, from 7:30 p.m. to midnight. The \$4 donation fee will go toward the documentary project. The fundraiser will include five local bands, never before seen student films and the most talked about celebrity in Provo circles.

"Two of my really good friends need help and they have a good cause, so we're happy to play," said Curtis Leonard, 24, a senior majoring in political science from Auburn, Wash., and bass player for band Audio Armada, which will perform at the fundraiser.

The people Arnsten and Cook will be filming live in such a state of poverty that the world doesn't feel they deserve anything but handouts, Arnsten said.

"The documentary can bring awareness. With video you can hear it, feel it and see it," said Jen Boehme, BYU graduate and executive director of HELP International. "It's not only about being there to see the destruction, but to see how they live. It gives people the desire to help."

HELP was started in January 1999 by Warner Woodworth, BYU professor of organization leadership. The organization grew from the Hurricane Mitch crisis that hit South America in 1998. After watching the devastation Woodworth worked to inspire BYU students into action.

The first year the organization existed it sent 46 volunteers to Honduras and the following year it sent 76 into three other countries. Last year it became a professional, tax-deductible organization, Boehme said.

HELP utilizes the principle of microcredit to build the economies of suffering countries. Government and religious aides send food and medical care after a crisis has hit, but once they've pulled out the people have to rebuild their lives and they have nothing to start with, Woodworth said.

Microcredit involves giving a small loan of \$50-\$100. The people are organized into village banks and volunteers train and help them develop savings accounts.

"There is a 96 to 98 percent payback rate," Boehme said.

The payback rate is high because of the training, because this is the first break many of these people have received and because the loans are mostly given to women, Woodworth said.

"The women are more responsible. They will use the money for the business and to educate their kids, not for alcohol and gambling," he said.

HELP partners with local institutions, Boehme said.

"It's a lateral learning experience where we are training them and they are teaching us," Boehme said.

Once volunteers have left, the institutions work to maintain all that has been implemented, she said.

When it started, HELP's goal was to raise \$100,000 and create 20 banks, but it raised \$116,000, started 47 new banks and strengthened another 49 banks, Woodworth said.