

Organization mobilizes students to change lives

By Wendy Weiler *NewsNet Staff Writer* - 24 Sep 2002

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courtesy of HELP International

Students go out to serve those in Third World countries to help educate the people in better servin themselves.

HELP International is recruiting BYU students in hopes of making the world a better place.

Helping Eliminate Poverty is a non-profit organization designed to assist the poor of the Third World.

The program develops volunteer leadership and skills through training and personalized humanitarian service abroad where participants help create local solutions to poverty.

"We get down in the countries, and we try to assess the needs," said Brooks Dame, 23, a senior from Ontario, Ore., majoring in Spanish, who was a country director last summer in El Salvador. "We teach square-foot gardening, micro-credit, and English as a second language. We build houses and work in orphanages - we do it all."

Jennifer Boehme, executive director of HELP International, graduated from BYU in international studies two years ago and said the program's mission is two-fold.

"Our mission is to be able to mobilize students to have an experience that will change their lives and make them be forever committed to help alleviate human suffering," Boehme said. "Also, we want to help poor families improve their quality of life."

An Organizational Behavior 551 class is hosting a reunion for HELP International on Friday to highlight last summer's activities.

"Everyone is welcome," Boehme said. "It's open to anyone who has ever participated with HELP International and anyone who would like to learn more about us."

The reunion will be on Friday, Sept. 27, at 7 p.m. in Room 710 TNRB.

A group of BYU students under the direction of Warner Woodworth, BYU professor of organizational behavior, started the program in Honduras in the summer of 1999 after Hurricane Mitch killed 20,000 locals and left one million homeless.

"Hurricane Mitch was a crisis of epic proportions, and here in the states we're oblivious to it," Woodworth said. "HELP has grown from responding to a crisis to be a pro-active organization with innovative tools to combat Third World poverty."

Woodworth said his motive was the sense that he has skills to bless others beyond his formal role as a professor and member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"Gandhi said, 'We must be the change we wish to see in the world.' That is what HELP is all about," Woodworth said.

One year after the pilot program in Honduras, Peru, El Salvador, Bolivia and Guatemala were added to the list of countries. Next summer HELP International plans to open services in Brazil.

Dame said about 75 percent of the volunteers last summer were BYU students.

"We target college students because they have mobility, independence and energy," said Jay Porter, 24, a senior from Sandy, majoring in international studies. Porter is the program director who opened HELP International in El Salvador.

"We're doing recruiting at BYU, the U of U and UVSC. BYU is a great place to recruit because the language capabilities and foreign experience the students have are unparalleled," Porter said.

While HELP International is neither through BYU nor the LDS Church, Porter said most volunteers are Latter-day Saints.

HELP International requires all volunteers to raise or contribute \$2,750, but Dame said the program benefits the volunteers as much as it does the people they help.

"I taught people how to speak English and make square-foot gardens, but really what I learned from them is so much more valuable than what I taught them," Dame said.

HELP International provides a hands-on learning experience for students studying development work and humanitarian relief. Some students have been able to use HELP International as an internship.

"I think HELP International provides an education experience you can't get in a classroom," Porter said. "It is the practical education whereas the classroom is a lot of

the theory. Our program is designed not only to alleviate poverty, but to train the volunteers who want to get involved with this kind of service in the future."

The structure of HELP International allows volunteers to have flexibility in their service experiences. Porter said HELP International wants volunteers to mold their service to compliment their academic learning with practical applications out in the field.

"Students can create their own programs whether they be in literacy or micro-credit," Porter said. "We form a basic skeleton and the volunteers give it shape with their own projects."

Volunteers work in the cities for six weeks to four months. HELP International rents houses for their volunteers and puts anywhere from eight to 17 volunteers in one house.

"It's fun," Dame said. "You come home at night and everybody shares their stories. Every day is a different adventure."

Ashley Mangus, 22, a senior from Noblesville, Ind., majoring in marriage family and human development, volunteered in El Salvador for six weeks and said her experience was worth every penny.

"Each day we did something totally different," Mangus said. "We hitched-hiked on the back of a flat-bed semi into the city, we went cliff-jumping, we learned how to do stitches and give shots, we taught English and we built houses. It's a lot of hard work, but it's so fun."

Dame served his mission in El Salvador and said he loves going back to serve the people.

"There is a need in El Salvador, and I feel like I have a responsibility as a human being to help my brothers and sisters," Dame said. "After having served a mission in a Third World country, I don't think I could come back and eat my t-bone steak and just forget about these people."

Last summer more than 70 people volunteered. Porter said the organization hopes to get twice as many for next summer.

"Our goal is to not exist anymore," Dame said. "When there is no need for HELP International, our job is done. That's probably a long ways off. I may never see it in my lifetime, but that's what we're trying to do."

For more information, visit the HELP International Web site at www.help-international.org.