

Forgoing cash, students give to African literacy program

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Aiming to combat third-world illiteracy and educational shortcomings, several Boston University organizations are collaborating with nonprofit organizations to encourage students to think twice before selling back textbooks for cash.

Students involved in the Community Service Center and the BU Golden Key Chapter are working with outside organizations to collect donated books to resell online. Now in its second year, the collected revenue from the online sales will help send books to children in Africa with inadequate educational tools to learn and read.

The student groups are also partnering with FORGE -- Facilitating Opportunities for Refuge Growth and Empowerment -- a nonprofit organization not explicitly affiliated with BU but which has BU members and seeks the help of college-aged people to implement programs that may improve refugees' quality of life.

Better World Books, an organization formed by University of Notre Dame alumni in 2002, works with student groups and bookstores at more than 1,000 schools across the country to collect textbooks left over after the buy-back process.

"It's not uncommon to see six or more children sharing a single book at school [in Africa]," said Better World Books New England Regional Director Sarah Reul in an email.

Now in its second year, the book drive -- from April 28 to May 8 -- has collection boxes placed around different campus spots, including academic buildings and residence halls. The participating groups are encouraging the community to drop their used books in the boxes, which will then be packed and sent to Better World Books.

"If you consider that each BU student probably has two or three books left over after buybacks and you think of the number of undergrads, there's huge potential to make a tremendous social impact," Reul said.

Proceeds from the books sold through Better World Books will go to Books for Africa, a nonprofit organization whose goal is to end book shortages in Africa. Books for Africa sends approximately 22 tons of books to Africa every week and has shipped more than 15 million books to 28 African countries since 1988, according to the organization's website.

"Our goal this year is to collect 7,000 books," said FORGE Ambassador Jac Woods, who was also involved with the drive last year. "Most people don't realize how far the books they donate will go. Five-hundred books alone will fund the shipment of 2,000 books to fill two school libraries in Africa."

Better World Books will also give 50 cents to each of the service organizations -- CSC, FORGE and Golden Key -- for every book sold online that was donated through BU, said Woods, a College of Communication junior.

FORGE will use the money it raises to fund two ongoing projects -- computer literacy training and a women's center -- through the Meheba Refugee Settlement in Northwestern Zambia, Woods said.

The major block for educational improvements in Africa is a lack of materials to decrease illiteracy, which ultimately creates a continuing cycle of poverty, Reul said.

Woods, who volunteered in Zambia with FORGE last summer, said she experienced the refugee plight firsthand.

"They are the forgotten souls of the world," Woods said. "Most of them suffer from hunger, inadequate access to quality education and unemployment. They have truly suffered and deserve so much more than what they're given."