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In making change, they are changed themselves

Program matches skills of volunteers with needs in developing countries

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Don Mercer has a rough idea of what he's in for when he arrives in Malawi in a couple of weeks. He knows he'll be working with farmer co-operatives to make their food processing systems more efficient.

Or maybe drying coffee beans.

Or maybe tea leaves.

Beyond that, he's not quite sure, but he's up for anything. As a volunteer with the fast-growing Leave for Change program, it's all part of the job.

"You have to be thinking on your feet all the time," the University of Guelph professor says.

Mercer is one of 100 people, up from just 25 last year, taking part in Leave for Change, a three-year-old program that began in Quebec and is now spreading across Canada thanks to funding from the Canadian International Development Agency.

Forty of the 100 spots this year are still available, says manager Agnès van't Bosch, who is travelling across Canada to promote Leave for Change.

Program volunteers give up two to four weeks of their vacation to work in developing countries across Africa and Asia. Their employers pay \$5,000 of their travel costs.

A key aspect of the program is that volunteers take the abilities they use on the job in Canada and apply them abroad, van't Bosch says.

"It's a unique program," she says. "They use their own knowledge and skills."

In Mercer's case, that means taking his expertise in food processing and working with farmers in Malawi to make their systems more efficient so less food is wasted.

If he does end up working with tea or coffee, he says his work will make the products more competitive on the international market.

The program addresses more than market issues, however. Karyn Freedman, a philosophy professor and gender violence researcher at Guelph, leaves for Botswana in September to work with the activist group Women Against Rape.

"One of the things I can bring them is a sense of the universality of sexual violence," says Freedman.

In doing so, she says, she hopes to break the sense of isolation such groups often feel, and to help them fight the stigma attached to violence against women.

"The stigma and taboo around violence against women, particularly sexual violence, is the greatest impediment to doing something about it," says Freedman, herself a victim of rape. "I bring both a personal and a professional understanding to the issue."

Mercer has been emailing the people he'll be working with, but communications with Africa are often difficult. That's why he's taking to heart advice from Leave for Change organizers to be flexible. For now, he's not even sure where he'll be staying in Malawi.

"That will be one of the first big surprises when I arrive," he says in a phone interview from his university office in Kemptville.

Program veteran Michael Gregson, a salesperson with pharmaceutical company Abbott Canada, says many surprises await first-timer volunteers like Mercer.

For Gregson, the biggest surprise was how inspired he was by the HIV/AIDS group he worked with the past two summers in Malawi. The former teacher helped the group spread awareness about the disease, speaking to village community groups and school children.

"Even though HIV/AIDS is quite widespread, awareness is really quite low," he says.

About three-quarters of the activists he worked with have HIV/AIDS themselves, he says, and little money to live on. But despite their own desperate conditions, they are committed to their cause.

"They are helping others, and barely have enough for themselves," he says with awe.

Their determination to continue their work inspired him to do more on his return to Canada. In the past two years, he has held several fundraisers with other Leave for Change volunteers, raising more than \$40,000 to send back to Malawi.

The money has not only funded the groups' awareness campaigns and medical clinics, but also set up a hatchery and a pig farm. The simple operations produce food for AIDS patients, while providing a source of revenue for the clinics.

Gregson's next goal is to raise money for an AIDS outpatient clinic at a Malawi hospital. His employer will match funds he raises.

"We thought the best thing we could do was help them help themselves," he says.

Van't Bosch says it is common for volunteers to return home feeling inspired to do more.

"They all come back saying they've learned at least as much, if not more, than they gave," she says.

Learning for Change works with agents on the ground in developing countries to determine what sort of expertise is needed. The program then puts out a call for experts on its website, uniterra.ca, and sorts through the list of volunteers to match skills with needs.

"It's a very field-driven program," she says, adding that volunteers need to respect traditional

ways of doing things while abroad.

All volunteers get two days of training on what to expect and cultural sensitivity. The spots still available this year range from agriculture to website development, reflecting the diversity of needs in developing countries.

Freedman says the name of the program, Leave for Change, reflects the program's essential character.

"You leave to effect change, but in the process, you are changed."