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A Better Stove

01.14.2010 | Service and Giving, Students According to the World Health Organization, indoor air pollution is responsible for 2.2 million deaths each year and is the leading cause of death in the world among children younger than 5, accounting for nearly 19 percent of deaths globally.

Local community leaders, Marianist volunteers from Spain led by Rafael Luna, HELP International and students in the University of Dayton's ETHOS program combined efforts last summer to bring the new stoves at a subsidized cost to 28 families. The stove design contains and concentrates the heat toward a cooking surface and funnels smoke out of the home through a chimney.

It's a substantial improvement over the open-flame stoves they replace. The chimney means substantially less indoor pollution, while the improved efficiency will save wood and reduce the hours of work spent collecting it. The new stoves are also raised off the floor, reducing the risk of burn to young children.

"No one wants to stand over a smoky fire all day long, only to be able to serve their children tortillas again. No one wants to spend long, labor-intensive days in the field," said Michael Vehar, who volunteered in Las Conchas as a graduate assistant with the University of Dayton's ETHOS program. ETHOS — Engineers in Technical, Humanitarian Opportunities of Service Learning — allows University of Dayton Engineering students to apply appropriate technology to solve problems around the world.

"When I was inside the homes in rural Guatemala, I could see the smoke and the black ceilings," Vehar said. "All of these families are subsistence farmers whose children suffer from malnutrition on account of not having a well-balanced diet."

In a related project, Vehar also raised funds to build a cafeteria with improved stoves for Las Conchas Marianist School, adding much-needed infrastructure for the entire community. The school's current cafeteria is located in a barn divided between the cafeteria and the community's medical clinic.

"The new building for the cafeteria will allow the Guatemalan students to have more space to study and cook, and also allow for the medical clinic to be expanded," said Brother Phil Aaron, administrator of the ETHOS program. "This is a great help."

It's a case of improved infrastructure building the capacity of an entire community.

"Even though this project was small, we helped give 28 families a new hope," said Vehar. "The ability to cook every day on a smokeless fire, an extra four-to-six hours per week not collecting wood, a stove lifted off the ground so that children can't fall into it and be burned — it's these little changes that can help a family work for a better life for themselves and their children."

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