AE Alumna is Living Her Calling to Serve the Poor in East Africa

After growing up in Sandy Lake, a small rural community in Western Pennsylvania, graduating from Penn State, and working for a construction management firm for six years in northern Virginia, Carey Steckler ’05 had a big Craigslist sale and moved to East Africa—it’s a story from Sandy Lake to Uganda.

Carey is the daughter of Edward and Patricia Steckler. She followed a family tradition in attending Penn State. Her father was a 1971 graduate of agricultural engineering. Carey received an integrated B.A.E./M.A.E. degree in 2005 in the construction option.

As an AE student, she spent fall 2003 in a student exchange program with the University of Leeds in the UK and fell in love with international travel through that experience. She also participated in the American Indian Housing Initiative building project during summer 2005, which involved the strawbale construction of a daycare center on the Northern Cheyenne reservation in Lame Deer, MT. Carey credits that experience with exposing her to collaborative multi-disciplinary design, sustainable design concepts, building materials innovation, management of a volunteer team, and building in a remote site location—all concepts that are directly applicable to her now daily work in Uganda.

She gained additional experience through summer internships with Foreman Program and Construction Managers in Zelienople, PA. Carey moved to Virginia, and from 2006–2011, she worked with Holder Construction Company.

Carey stated, "From a very young age I knew I would be an engineer like my daddy, and it became clear —and admittedly a little scary—to me while at Penn State that someday the construction field I was pursuing would align with something involving serving others." Carey had learned about the work of Engineering Ministries International (EMI) from AE classmate Kellie Bleecker Farster ’05g. EMI is a non-profit Christian development organization made up of architects, engineers and design professionals who donate their services in response to a shortage of experienced, well-educated design professionals in East Africa and elsewhere in the developing world.

Initially, Carey reached out to EMI in 2011 with a short-term trip in mind. In 2012, she began volunteering in Uganda as a construction manager—supporting estimating, planning and management of building projects for Christian ministries who serve the poor. After nearly three years in Uganda, Carey felt God’s plan for her was to remain with EMI in Uganda, and she accepted a full-time staff position in 2014.

Currently, Carey is the construction program manager for EMI’s East Africa office, located in Kampala, Uganda. This is a full-time, volunteer position made possible by financial donations from friends and church groups. Carey’s role is to support EMI’s construction managers and foremen as they help organizations complete their construction projects. Their work includes setting appropriate budgets and schedules, hiring qualified local contractors and crews, establishing good accounting practices, and negotiating contracts. In this way, EMI helps organizations best use their funds to serve the poor, orphaned, and widowed with their buildings and properties.

Another important part of EMI’s ministry is to train and mentor the men and women who work on the building crews. Carey explained that she sees no shortage of Ugandans who are willing to work hard for a fair wage and are thankful for the opportunity to learn new trades and provide for their families. EMI is committed to training and mentoring design professionals in their Uganda office. They regularly recruit East African interns to work with them, joining a team of interns every semester (largely juniors, seniors and recent graduates from American universities.)

EMI has six offices around the world and partners with other organizations such as schools, hospitals, and ministry centers to design and construct their campuses and buildings. They also respond to water, sanitation, and health needs as well as natural disasters, such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and the 2013 typhoon in the Philippines. The earthquake in Haiti devastated cities and neighborhoods because of poor building design and construction methods. This is not a problem specific to Haiti. Carey said, “I believe we’re responsible as design professionals to respond to the need for our expertise around the world to design and build safe buildings.”

In late 2014 EMI completed work on a small hospital in a Ugandan village not far from Entebbe airport. The facility is located on the grounds of an orphanage campus which is home to children with HIV/AIDS who have been orphaned and abandoned, and serves these children as well as the surrounding village community. A team of EMI architects and engineers (staff, volunteers, and interns) designed the facility and Carey and others on EMI’s construction management team managed the crew of Ugandan laborers and craftsmen who executed the construction.

Friends can join Carey’s monthly support team or make a one-time contribution by visiting www.emiworld.org/donate.php and finding her name in the drop-down list of staff members. She is grateful for new supporters who desire to invest in this life-changing work.

Additionally, EMI has needs around the world for architects and engineers in various fields. If you are interested in volunteering on a 10-14 day trip or longer, you can learn more at: emiworld.org or email Carey at carey@emiea.org.

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