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# Outreach effort wins nonprofit designation

Explorers Sans Frontieres (ESF), Explorers Without Borders, is a nonprofit organization that is changing the world and building cultural connections one community at a time. Founder and president Shonta D. Collins said she always had a passion for making the world a better place, and through her committed hard work and dedication the dream became a reality in February 2008 when ESF received 501 (C) (3) status through the Greater Philadelphia Urban Affairs Coalition.

The main goal of the group is to help college students to develop independent research initiatives, support humanitarian efforts and travel abroad to developing countries.

Group leaders do everything to make the experience one that will help their students to obtain hands-on practical experience in various areas of study and at the same time give them the opportunity to participate in cultural exchanges with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds.

Since its inception, ESF has supported or hosted 30 outreach projects in the areas of health and human services, cultural education and social fundraising. The organization has also served thousands in the Caribbean (especially Haiti) and the African community.

The Elise Joseph Foundation, a Haitian nonprofit group, has received assistance from ESF through hosting Health Fairs. AFRICOM has also benefited from ESF assistance during their health fair. They were able to provide financial support for four students traveling to Senegal.

"I envisioned young people going out to serve and support not only in Philadelphia but also in countries that are in development like Senegal, West Africa and the Caribbean," said Collins. "There are drastic differences, as you can imagine, from the infrastructure to the way of life.

"We get to see firsthand how these people are living in poverty," she continued. "ESF believes that we can contribute to the world in many different aspects of life and building on what we learn in the classroom from other disciplines can provide for a more balanced organization."

The leaders at ESF are a very diverse group of people. In reading their profiles it was interesting to find out that the majority of them were born in Third World countries or had been born to parents from Third World countries.

We spoke with three of the leaders. Bridgette S. Nelson, director of health-care education and services, was born here in the United States; however, both of her parents are originally from Jamaica. She said her upbringing can be described as an incorporation or blending of two major cultures, African American and West

"To truly know me, is to know of the passion that I have for helping people," she said. "My passion closely mirrors that of our founder, Shonta D. Collins.

"Giving so much and receiving back this overwhelming sense of appreciation is incredible," she continued as she shared her experiences. "It is true that Jamaica is not my place of birth, but somehow, I still manage to feel some sort of connection to the island.

"When I manage to travel there, unlike the tourists, I see the disparities of the people living there. This is my major area of focus, helping those who are not in the position to help themselves. I feel a sense of obligation to help the people of my parents' homeland."

Nelson said she is fortunate to be a part of ESF.

"I think in some way I was waiting for an organization like this to come along, and I am blessed to be a part of it," she said.

Lara Lechtenberg, director of student outreach and services, said she thinks it's only recently that anyone has been able to focus on the job denoted by their title.

"As an organization, we are only about a year old, and, of course, when you are new and growing, it's more of an 'all-hands-on-deck' atmosphere," she pointed out.

What this means is that by doing more health fairs and fundraisers the organization has grown with a new batch of student volunteers.

"I'm increasingly freer to focus on meeting potential student leaders and professional members and facilitating their involvement with the organization," said Lechtenberg. "The first thing we teach any new student about outreach is that we are here to reach people, so you have to be outgoing. If people come by your table at a health fair looking hesitant or unsure of themselves, it's their job to make the first move and draw them in to start teaching them."

Lechtenberg said some of the ESF student leaders are from Jamaican-American families, which is part of the reason they have organized a 2010 volunteer trip to Jamaica.

Collins said that they are looking for health professionals of all disciplines to travel abroad with ESF.

"We are working closely with Key Correspondents, who have supported over eight humanitarian trips to the island," Collins told us. "We are planning to provide services to local hospitals, clinics and orphanages. This is a long time coming and we are very excited about this partnership."

If you would like to learn more about ESF or donate to their cause, please visit [www.explorerswithoutborders.org](http://www.explorerswithoutborders.org)