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Harvard SPOUTS clean water effort

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Students work on filter factory to help save lives in Uganda

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Clean drinking water is something most Americans take for granted. But in the Republic of Uganda, water-borne diseases such as cholera are still the leading cause of death in children under age 5, and more than half of all hospital deaths occur because patients lack clean water — two stark realities that a group of Harvard University undergraduates is working to change.

SPOUTS (Sustainable Point-Of-Use Treatment and Storage) of Water, the not-for-profit they formed, aims to increase access to clean water in the East African nation by building a self-sustaining ceramic water filter factory a few hours outside the capital city, Kampala.

“A friend and I were taking a cigarette break when he told me about the project. I was instantly hooked,” said John Kye, a 21-year-old economics major who became the head of SPOUTS’ international coordination board. “I could just see the potential of the project so easily. Clean drinking water is a basic necessity everyone deserves to have.”

That premise had led Kathy Ku to begin working on water issues in the Dominican Republic with Engineers Without Borders during her freshman year. Shortly afterward, she traveled to Uganda to teach a health course and came across the same water problems.

“I researched various technologies, business models, and soon thereafter, what started as a personal research project expanded to involve other students,” the 20-year-old chemical and physical biology major said in an email from Uganda, where she is taking a year off from Harvard to help with the water filter factory’s construction.

“We felt that ceramic water filters were the most appropriate technology and worked with various engineers to research and perfect this model,” she said. “And rather

than relying on the traditional delivery method of 'aid,' we hope to use a business model to create a market for ceramic water filters while expanding jobs and opportunities for locals.”

The filters will be sold for about \$20 to non-governmental organizations in Uganda, which currently buy them from abroad for as much as \$100, Kye said. The NGOs will then distribute them to households.

The project recently led SPOUTS of Water to be named one of the runners-up in the Harvard President's Challenge, earning it \$10,000, about one-third of what it will cost to start the factory. The group has raised the remainder of the cost from family and friends. And if the project is successful, Kye said, they hope to expand it to other parts of Uganda and other countries.

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