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News

THE DAILY PENNSYLVANIAN

SEAS students help bring Ecuador school into the Info Age

BY DANA KLINEK

The Daily Pennsylvanian

It is common for Engineering students to share their technological know-how with schools and businesses throughout Philadelphia. But last Saturday, in collaboration with the Urban Technology Project -- a School District of Philadelphia service-learning initiative -- they worked to bring their expertise a little farther off campus -- to Quito, Ecuador.

Engineering School students began working with the UrbanTech program just a few months ago in a special partnership called "Formando Un Puente"-- Spanish for "Building a Bridge." Through the program, the students are refurbishing computers which they will ultimately bring in August to Escuela Fiscal Zoila Ugarte de Landivar, a public elementary school in Quito.

A group of 10 students -- three from Penn who have not yet been chosen; one each from Edison Ferrara, Simon Gratz and Olney high schools in North Philadelphia; and four from University City New School -- will make the trip to Ecuador. Several constituencies will fund the trip, including UrbanTech and local corporations, though organizers said they will also ask Civic House and campus Latino groups to aid in the sponsoring.

During their two-week stay, the Philadelphia and Penn students will connect the school's lab to the Internet and train local teachers and students to use and maintain the computers.

"There is a growing digital gap... and in education, it is important to have access to technology," said UrbanTech Director Edison Freire, a teacher with the Philadelphia School District. "Low-income communities are left behind, especially in Ecuador, where public schools don't have access to the Internet."

Ecuador recently suffered an economic tailspin during which public schools closed for 51 days and funds for the computer lab being built in Escuela Fiscal Zoila Ugarte de Landivar dried up. However, Freire, who spent two weeks in Ecuador

last month, was able to convince an Ecuadorian congressman to search for additional funding.

"Penn students are aware of [the digital gap] from the perspective of privilege [and] Philadelphia students from another perspective," Freire said.

"[The project] gives people something to rally around as a city," he added. "[It] brings together Penn and the immediate community... to bridge the gap that exists across class, ethnicity, culture and language using technology as a tool."

Elementary school students at the New School in West Philadelphia have been corresponding with the students at the Quito school via e-mail.

Vu Tran, a junior at Edison High School who has been working with UrbanTech for nearly eight months, said, "I hope that I can bring some of what technology today is like and how it is used for educational purposes."

"We're trying to go into business, but we're mostly trying to help out the community," Edison senior Ramon Diaz added. "Hispanics make up a large part of the population [in Northern Philadelphia]. They are behind in technology [and] we want to make it easier for them to access technology."

And Engineering freshman Pranav Gupta said "the mentoring program with the students is very motivating" and that helping the high school students to select technology books for their personal libraries is uplifting.

But "Formando Un Puente" is "a lot more than a technology outreach project," according to first-year Graduate School of Education student Oufreez Argenta, the program coordinator for the Engineering School.

"At an even higher level, it's a service-learning project that crosses international boundaries and a mentoring project across cultures and ages," he said.

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