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Engineering Students Designing Refugee Shelter

CEDARVILLE, OHIO – As the humanitarian crisis in Syria continues to make international headlines, a senior mechanical engineering project at Cedarville University is confronting the refugee problem by designing an emergency shelter that can last for at least a year.

“It’s one thing to hear about the massive numbers of refugees,” said Grace Littlefield, a senior mechanical engineering major from Hiram, Ohio, “but it’s another thing entirely when you are actually involved in designing something that refugees need to live in for a year.”

The team must consider a number of factors as it designs the shelter. “There are a lot more details than a roof and walls,” said Littlefield. “We need to envision the area where the shelter will be built, as well as the materials that will be available.”

In addition to material considerations, the team’s shelter needs to accommodate specific religious and cultural customs of the largely Muslim culture that makes up most of the Syrian refugee population. The team needs to plan for separate places of prayer for men and women and spaces that accommodate a strong family bond.

“I want to expose students to effective engineering outside the U.S.,” said Dr. Darren Holland, the project’s faculty adviser and an assistant professor of mechanical engineering. “Taking culture into consideration is a very important part of that.”

Earlier this fall the team spoke with a relative of Holland’s, Beth Kuttab, who is a former director of social and relief services for the UNRWA, the largest refugee agency in the Middle East. Kuttab shared her experience working with Palestinian refugees in Jordan and gave suggestions for shelter design.

Holland highlighted the engineering program’s focus on providing hands-on opportunities for students to be able to use their skills to benefit people around the world.

“As Christians, we are commanded to work for the betterment of the poor and the outcast, and as engineers, we have special abilities to meet physical needs that others are unable to meet,” Holland said.

In past years Cedarville engineering students have traveled to Bolivia to test and improve water wells. It was on one of those trips that Littlefield found a passion to use engineering to help others — a desire she is fulfilling thanks to the relief shelter project.

The team will create a scale model of the shelter this spring, and future senior project teams will continue the work. When the shelter is complete, Holland plans to use it in a national competition sponsored by Samaritan’s Purse, an evangelical Christian humanitarian aid organization.

Located in southwest Ohio, Cedarville University is an accredited, Christ-centered, Baptist institution with an enrollment of 3,760 undergraduate, graduate, and online students in more than 100 areas of study. Founded in 1887, Cedarville is recognized nationally for its authentic Christian community, rigorous academic programs, strong graduation and retention rates, accredited professional and health science offerings, and leading student satisfaction ratings. For more information about the University, visit www.cedarville.edu.