

UML program brings light to remote areas of Peru

By MICHAEL LAFLEUR, Sun Staff
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LOWELL -- Seven times in the past four years, University of Massachusetts Lowell graduate student Jesus Solis has been venturing into the remote mountain hinterlands of his native Peru to bring the isolated villagers there a taste of the 21st century.

Solis, 29, is studying under UMass Lowell professor John Duffy in the university's solar-energy engineering program. With the skills he is learning, he has been able to help bring solar-powered water pumps, lights and -- most crucially -- radio transceivers to some of the most isolated hamlets on earth.

"You feel like you need to give something back to your people," he said.

Solis began his involvement with the UMass Lowell Peru Project while an undergraduate student at Peru's national engineering college in Lima, the South American nation's capital city.

Twice a year since 1997, UMass Lowell faculty, staff and students have been making the trek to Peruvian communities surrounding the Pacific coast city of Huarney.

The cumulative total of those two-week visits: 27 villages helped with the installation of 65 solar-powered systems, generating the electricity needed to power everything from water pumps for village wells to vaccine refrigerators in rural health clinics, lights in the medical posts, laptop computers in remote village schools and radios for communication between medical personnel in the mountain communities and the hospital in Huarney.

While they're there, students travel on twisting, narrow and absurdly steep Andean mountain roads, sleep where there is no plumbing or electricity and eat indigenous food provided by grateful villagers.

"I love to go to these places, but it's very hard to be there," said Manuel Heredia, 25, also a native of Peru, who has made three trips into the Andes with the project.

"It's two weeks without all the facilities you have here."

The most recent visit was in January, and the students' experiences were the subject of a campus presentation yesterday, where the program caught the eye of potential volunteers such as Eric Morgan, 27, of Pepperell, also a graduate student in the solar-energy program.

"It's a great opportunity to volunteer and get an education at the same time," said Morgan.

Founded by the Rev. Paul Soper, UMass Lowell's Catholic chaplain from 1995 until 2001, Duffy has led the Peru Project trips every January and summer since August 1998.

He said his involvement began soon after project organizers realized the villagers needed electricity badly, and in a region where nearest electric utility is far off, solar energy seemed the perfect fit.

"Something that's relatively simple can have a profound impact, things like running water," he said.

Most student volunteers come from the solar program's student-run Energy Engineering Club.

Club president Tanya Martinez, 27, made her first trip last January.

Martinez, who is part Native American, said she hopes to be able to apply the lessons she learns about renewable-energy systems in remote areas to benefit her Mi'kmaq tribe's reservations in eastern Canada.

"Our tribe is actually doing a feasibility study for a 30 megawatt wind-power plant," she said.

Peru Project organizers are in need of used laptop computers. Anyone who wishes to donate one should e-mail Duffy at john_duffy@uml.edu or call (978) 934-2968.

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