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A college assignment — to build cardboard houses for the homeless — has given Bekka Grady of Port a way to use her interior design talents to help others, including people in remote Kenya

When 2010 Port Washington High School graduate Bekka Grady enrolled in the interior design program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she never guessed she would be designing houses for the homeless.

And not just any houses, but innovative structures built of cardboard that are light and strong and can be disassembled, packed into boxes and shipped to areas of the county that have been devastated by natural disasters, even to places as remote as some African countries.

Africa, in fact, is where the 21-year-old Grady, her interior design instructor and two other women are headed in January to investigate whether the type of cardboard house Grady helped design could provide shelter for the people of Bura Tana, Kenya.

“I don’t want to just design houses,” Grady said. “I want to be involved in something that makes a difference in people’s lives, and I think this is a good opportunity to do that.”

Grady’s two-week trip to Kenya will begin Jan. 5, but the journey that led her there started almost a year ago when her teacher, Lesley Sager, an assistant faculty associate in the university’s interior design department, challenged her students to design cardboard houses that would provide temporary shelter for people displaced by natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes.

“My professor is great because she comes up with ideas like this that really challenge us,” Grady said. “The idea was to build a home out of cardboard — because it is light and strong and can be shipped to areas that don’t have any resources — to provide a sense of privacy,

comfort and safety to people whose homes are gone and may be living together in areas like stadiums."

Working in teams of three, the students started by interviewing survivors of natural disasters.

"I talked to a woman who went through a hurricane," Grady said. "I can't imagine living through something like that. They were in a school so packed with people that there were six to seven groups per classroom. Just finding a place to sleep was a struggle."

Inspired by the woman's story and others like it, Grady and her teammates built a scale model of a home that fused style and function in a design that looked more like a Frank Lloyd Wright creation than an emergency shelter.

Their design caught the eye of Sager, who selected it to be the class prototype. A full-scale version of the house was constructed out of cardboard and exhibited at the Modern Museum of Contemporary Art in Madison.

Grady was pleased with the recognition, of course, but had yet to envision how her design would become more than an academic endeavor. She had no idea that a series of coincidences would lead her and her cardboard house design to Kenya.

That connection started with her proud parents, Paul and Donna Grady, who took plenty of photos of their daughter's house design when it was on exhibit at the museum.

At the time, Mr. Grady, a behavioral health therapist for Ozaukee County, was working with Mequon resident Susan Miller, who was an intern in the county's Department of Human Services.

Miller is friends with a Guatemalan priest, Father Ernesto Contreras, who works with the Bura Tana Catholic Mission and was in Mequon learning English. Miller took one look at Mr. Grady's photos and thought immediately of the photos she has seen of Bura Tana.

"Parts of Kenya are wonderfully lush, but not Bura Tana," Miller said. "This is a typically dry and barren place that has torrential floods. The people there have very few resources, so they build their homes out of sticks and mud. When the floods come, their homes are washed away and they are left with no shelter, no food, no (drinkable) water and plenty of disease.

"That's why this cardboard house project would be great."

For Grady, a young woman who was searching for a way to use her talents as an interior designer to help people in need, Miller's idea was a stroke of genius.

"My goal is to introduce the houses to Bura Tana as soon as possible," Grady said.

But both Grady and Miller realize their goal of helping the people of Bura Tana could fail if they don't start by learning firsthand about the people of this village in southeastern Kenya.

“Ideally, we would try to incorporate some of their home-building techniques into our design,” Miller said.

So when Grady, Miller, Sager and an acquaintance of Sager’s — a woman who is a carpenter and speaks Swahili — travel to Kenya, they’ll be on a fact-finding mission. Although they won’t be bringing cardboard houses with them, they won’t be going empty handed.

Grady is working with the nonprofit organization One Laptop Per Child and the UW-Madison student chapter of the American Society of Interior Designers to raise money for specially designed, rugged laptop computers for the Pope John Paul II Academy, a school of about 200 students between the ages of 6 and 12 in Bura Tana.

She has raised $3,000, enough for 16 laptops that cost $185 each. Her goal is to raise another $700 so she can purchase a total of 20 laptops.

Grady and her companions will be introducing technology to a region of Africa that Miller said has only recently developed a rudimentary and semi-reliablepower grid. It’s a good thing, Grady noted, that the laptops come with solar chargers. They are Wi-Fi equipped and loaded with education software so they will be useful for students and parents even if an Internet connection is not available.

Miller said she also hopes to bring inspiration to the people of Bura Tana, especially the girls and young women. She noted that the population of the Bura Tana is predominantly Muslim, and the school is unique in this region of Africa because about half the students are girls.

“For parents in this area to send their girls to school is a big deal,” she said. “And I think it’s important that we’re coming as women showing that we can make a difference.”

For Grady, it will be a trip of a lifetime, one that she hopes will bridge the divide between her studies and her life’s ambition to help people in need.

“I don’t know what to expect, but I’m really excited,” she said. “I’ve wanted to do mission work for a long time, so this is such an awesome opportunity for me.”

Donations to Grady’s laptop fund can be made through www.gofundme.com/olpc-BuraTana.

Image Information: STANDING OUTSIDE HER home in Port Washington, Bekka Grady, an interior design student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, held a model of a cardboard house she helped design for use as a temporary shelter by victims of natural disasters. Grady, along with Susan Miller of Mequon (right), and two other woman, hope to use Grady’s design as a prototype for cardboard houses that can be sent to a barren part of Kenya where floods wash away houses built of sticks and mud. The women plan to travel to Bura Tana, Kenya, where the photo to the left was taken, on a fact-finding mission in January. They will bring with them specially designed laptop computers like the one held by Miller for use in a local school.
Photo by Bill Schanen IV