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students

University group hopes to provide light for impoverished

University senior Patrick Delaney works to provide solar-powered lanterns to Nicaraguans.

By Sam Darcy

When the sun goes down in parts of Nicaragua, the only light source for many wooden homes is the flame from a pop bottle filled with diesel fuel.

But a group of University students designed a plan to provide light to some of the 40 percent of Nicaraguans living without electricity.

The students created a nonprofit organization called Bright New Ideas, which plans to provide 500 solar-powered lanterns for Nicaraguans by December.

The idea came about last January when electrical engineering senior Patrick Delaney traveled to Nicaragua in hopes of providing electricity through hydropower. The country has the lowest electrification rate in the Americas, he said.

While investigating streams, Delaney discovered a family hours away from any city that used a solar panel to charge a car battery.

"People told me they wanted light more than anything, but couldn't afford a system," Delaney said.

Delaney returned to Minnesota and joined marketing and supply chain senior Aleks Kladnitsky and several other students to form what they said they hope to be a sustainable nonprofit organization.

The students worked quickly to set up a business plan and find a manufacturer for the lanterns before six of them traveled to Nicaragua for 17 days in August.

The group met with local business leaders, including John Stavig, director for the Center of Entrepreneurial Studies, who advised the students to protect themselves and their inventory.

"It's a great cause and they are extremely passionate, but it's not without risk," Stavig said.

When in Nicaragua, the students met with a nonprofit organization to show the lanterns in remote countryside areas most in need.

Delaney said most people he met had never seen a movie, so seeing the nightly lantern demonstrations would attract crowds of 30 to 40 people to

one house.

"These people are not lazy or unintelligent, but just happen to live in locations that put them at a huge disadvantage," Delaney said.

Kerosene and other current light sources used in the country endanger the families living in wooden homes and can cause fatal upper respiratory infections, especially in children, Delaney said.

The students' contact in Nicaragua, Mario Alemán, said the lanterns will help people develop a better quality of life.

"The solar lantern opens new doors for basic activities like reading, walking at night, cooking and safety," Alemán said. "It's going to significantly improve the education, the economic situation, health and environment for Nicaragua."

Since returning, the students focused efforts on raising money and said they hope to expand a larger scale effort to other nations in the Americas by May.

Delaney said he and his colleagues feel the extreme importance of the work because people's livelihoods depend on it.

"It's become my life, to some extent," Kladnitsky said. "When I get up in the morning, it motivates me."