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Pencils for Kids Founder Inspires Premeds

By DILLON VAN AUKEN, CONTRIBUTING WRITER
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CHARLENE MORTYN

Robin Mednick, shown speaking to students in Harvard Hall, created Pencils for Kids, a not-for-profit grassroots organization that serves the educational needs of the community of Libore, Niger.

The founder of Pencils for Kids (P4K)—a grassroots organization committed to improving education in the world’s most impoverished communities—recounted the history of P4K and encouraged premedical students to follow a similar path at a presentation hosted by the Harvard Premedical Society Monday night.

Robin Mednick, P4K’s founder and executive director, traced the history of P4K from its beginnings in Libore, Niger, a small commune outside the capital city of Niamey. In a 2007 United Nations report, Niger was ranked the worst country in the world to live.

In December 2005, Mednick’s friend described the disturbing sight of 30 kids sharing a single pencil on his trip to Libore.

“At that moment, I told him, ‘Stop talking—we need to do something,’” said Mednick, who holds an M.A. from Oxford University in Politics and Economics and a law degree from Osgoode Hall Law School of York University.

That day, Mednick organized for a box of school supplies to be sent to the commune. One box eventually led to a van full of boxes, and soon the mayor of Libore invited her to visit and witness the box opening.

The national media was called to broadcast the distribution of the school supplies, which Mednick equated to manna from heaven for the children. To even Mednick’s surprise, the mayor announced that Mednick planned on building a new school for the village.

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With the help of local NGO's and the Canadian Embassy, the school was built. P4K has since initiated several other programs in the area that it hopes to expand—including a girls' scholarship program and an agricultural education program for young boys—increasing its influence to much more than just pencils.

Mednick's husband, an ophthalmologist, also helped to bring ORBIS, a charity devoted to curing preventable blindness, to Niger in order to train local eye doctors.

Mednick's story resonated strongly with audience members, many of whom were premeds wishing to exert a similar positive impact on the world.

"The event definitely made me realize the ability of one person to impact the world community and truly make a difference in people's lives," Khin-Kyemon Aung '14 said.

With a motto of "do it afraid," Mednick urged students to tackle global health problems, even if they are frightened of the enormity of the challenges they face or lack a concrete plan of action.

"Don't get overwhelmed by the huge problems facing the world in the field of global health," she said. "There's nothing wrong with starting with small steps."

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