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## **CULLEN COLLEGE STUDENT SPREADS INTERNATIONAL COMPASSION AND KINDNESS TO NEEDY**

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By:

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In the summer of 2015 UH biomedical engineering student Pietro Cicalese found himself surrounded by astonishing squalor in Haiti. The area was densely populated yet there was no water or medical resources for the sick. And the houses ? if you could call them that ? were shacks.

?I have never seen anything like that. It was very eye opening to see poverty of that scale,? said Cicalese.

Fortunately for Cicalese, he was a visitor, a volunteer with the Friends of Haiti group, learning how to take basic vital statistics and creating impromptu triage areas for doctors to treat the impoverished patients.

Cicalese says the trip was a moment in time he will never forget. In fact, he?s based much of his present life on what he saw there, founding the Global Humanitarian Student Initiative (GHSI) group to offer student services for humanitarian relief efforts around the world.

So, by the time Cicalese graduates in 2018 from the Cullen College of Engineering, he?ll have earned two degrees ? a bachelor?s and master?s in biomedical engineering through the accelerated master?s fellowship program.

He?ll also be a noted humanitarian.

### **Doing it themselves**

Not content with merely being a part of a non-governmental organization like the Red Cross, for example, Cicalese yearned to have students run their own humanitarian program, set their own schedules and recruit their own medical professionals to assist them.

?I think students should be actively trying to better themselves in terms of leading these kind of initiatives,

especially students interested in going to medical school. It's important for those students to invest energy to develop themselves as opposed to just developing their C.V.,? Cicalese says straight from the heart, because he is one of those students.

No doubt, his application to medical school will look stellar.

### **A natural**

Born in Italy to two doctors, Cicalese and family moved to America when he was a baby, and as early life experiences tend to, he was inspired to both travel internationally and become a doctor. His parents' dedication to their patients impressed him from a young age.

?Their role in inspiring me to do this kind of work was their philosophy on medicine and how the well-being of a person should be put above all else,? said Cicalese. With that strong sense of compassion, he moved forward, founding GHSI along with a fellow student at the time, Dennis Kunichoff, to do what they could, as undergraduates, to empower students to coordinate and conduct their own humanitarian service trips at home and around the world. From the pair of founding members, GHSI now has 30 students on its roster.

### **First stop: Sicily**

For the first trip, in the summer of 2016, Cicalese and nine other students traveled to the island of Sicily in Italy for 11 days to help the migrant and refugee populations there. They took along one U.S. doctor, Cicalese's father, and they teamed with the University of Palermo and a non-profit Mediterranean research institute, which provided additional doctors and assistance.

In the remote area he visited, Cicalese said there is a lot of mistrust toward medical professionals among the migrant populations, but students were able to build the trust by simply being honest.

?We would have open discussions that would last hours, just discussing what we wanted to do and how we wanted to help, and really highlighting the fact it hadn't been done before and we had no model to follow, and that we were just doing our best with what we had,? said Cicalese.

No surprise that the model they created, having kind and interested young students pre-screen patients, turned out to be highly effective.

### **On to Greece**

In the summer of 2017 the group goes to Greece with two UH professors, Anjali Kanojia of comparative cultural studies and Bradley Smith from the psychological health and learning sciences department.

The focus of the Greece trip is to study the Syrian migrant crises and its impact on Greece.

?The vast majority of what we'll see in Greece is mental trauma,? said Cicalese.

As a side project Cicalese has launched a research migration program to delve into his Italian heritage. ?We're doing research on the migration of Italians to the United States to understand what caused them to move from Italy and if they've found what they're looking for in the U.S,? he said. His pet project was funded by the Italian government

Sounds like a biographical work for this budding doctor born in Italy, and he'd probably answer in the affirmative. He's found exactly where he belongs, at the corner of healthcare and humanitarianism.