

Help: A child's smile is reward enough for them

FROM PAGE F1



Gail Geesaman

Job: Operating room nurse, Milford Hospital
Countries visited: Honduras, Kenya, China, Philippines

Gail Geesaman was in the operating room during her first overseas medical trip when a volcano erupted seven miles from where volunteers were working in the Philippines.

The team, already performing surgery by flashlight, did the only thing they could – they kept working. Later that night, volunteers watched from the roof of their hotel as lava streamed down the sides of the volcano.

"You do what you have to do," said Geesaman, 54, of Milford, who has been on five trips with Operation Smile, a medical service organization that provides reconstructive facial surgery to poor children worldwide.

She likes working on children with facial deformities because of the difference the surgery makes. In many developing countries, anyone born with a cleft palate or cleft lip is immediately looked down upon by the rest of the community.

They're often ostracized and forced to beg in the streets to survive.

"It's a surgery where you see results. It's just immediate gratification," said Geesaman, who often works 12-hour days during the 10-day trips. "You can change a whole child's life."

Watching an erupting volcano might have scared someone else off another medical mission, but not Geesaman. Not even an earthquake on the last day of her trip could deter her.

"I want this to be a habit for me," she said. "Doing this is quite addictive."



Dr. David Birch

Job: Family physician, affiliated with Beebe Medical Center in Lewes

Countries visited: Haiti, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Honduras, China

Dr. David Birch wasn't yet a doctor the first time he traveled overseas to help someone he didn't know. In 1985, he was still an intern, just a year out of medical school, when he went to Haiti after hearing of a need for medical help there.

More than 15 overseas trips later, Birch is still helping people he doesn't know in countries far from home. He most recently returned from a trip to Macau, China, to fill in for other doctors who work in a clinic there but were leaving to treat patients in another part of the country. He found out about that trip while helping out during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

For him, volunteering his time and talent is like breathing. "I have to," said Birch, 47, a family physician who lives in Lewes. "During Katrina, I told my wife I couldn't sit and watch it on TV. I had to be there to help."

Birch isn't affiliated with any particular international program. He responds to requests from churches and others. His usually sets up a clinic for the local church or community where he visits. His clinics have been located in plywood bus stops, homes and mud huts.

He always pays his own way, from airfare to lodging to food. And he brings all medications and equipment he plans on using.

Over the years, volunteering has become a family affair. His wife, Melanie, a registered nurse, often accompanies him on mission trips. His two children, Miles, 17, and Lydia, 20, also have gone along at times to take on the role of check-in nurse, pharmacist or lab assistant.

It's a good thing they're together for those two weeks. "That's the only vacation I get," Birch said.



ABOVE: In the Philippines, retired Kent General urologist Dr. Rafael Zaragoza and other Operation We Care volunteers get creative, operating on two patients at the same time in the same room. **RIGHT:** Nanticoke Memorial nurse Kathy Chupp captures a moment with an older woman in Ecuador.

Kassie Grey



Job: Nurse, St. Francis Special Care Nursery at St. Francis Hospital in Wilmington
Countries visited: Haiti and Jamaica

To this day, Kassie Grey still doesn't know who slipped the volunteer application for Global Health Ministries into the nurses station at the St. Francis Special Care Nursery. But she's eternally grateful for its mysterious delivery.

For years Grey, 49, of Wilmington, pondered the possibility of going overseas on a medical mission. She thought the experience would give her a better understanding of different cultures.

What she didn't know was just how much it would steal her heart. The neonatal nurse made her first trip with Global Health in 2004. She was part of a team of doctors, nurses and other health professionals who traveled to Haiti to provide medical care for people in the country's rural villages and decaying cities. Since then she's made two more trips, returning to Haiti in 2005 and Jamaica in May.

During the trips, the group worked out of old schools and churches with dirt floors, stringing up curtains to create makeshift exam rooms. They distributed medicines that came out of someone's suitcase. Some days they treated as many as 60 people, some who walked miles for the chance to see a doctor.

Grey's memories are vivid: the little children with their hair tinged red because of malnutrition, the old women with high blood pressure and back pain from doing manual labor, the smiles on the faces of the people grateful for someone to listen to them.

And then there was the baby. He was only 6 or 7 months old and so tiny, no more than 12 pounds. He was in the late stages of AIDS. There was nothing doctors could do to save him. Someone suggested that the grandmother allow the little boy to be taken to the hospital; she refused.

Grey and the others knew he would die soon, probably before the end of the week. It pained her to know that if only he had been born in the United States, he could have had an excellent chance of having a long childhood, if not life.

But sadness isn't something Grey associates with her volunteer experiences in the Caribbean. "It was much more than I expected," she said. "I think it rejuvenated me in my nursing practice. It renews your spirit. You see you can make a difference."



Dr. Christian Pizarro

Job: Cardiothoracic surgeon and director of the Nemours Hospital for Children

Countries visited: Chile, Peru, Argentina and Mexico

Pediatric heart surgery had never before been done in Arequipa, Peru, before Dr. Christian Pizarro arrived last January as part of a humanitarian mission.

By the time he left 10 days later, 16 children had been operated on to treat problems ranging from septal defects – sometimes called a hole in the heart – to more complicated cases like tetralogy of Fallot, a rare but life-threatening congenital problem made up of four separate heart defects.

Pizarro, who was born in Chile and attended medical school there, wanted to help as many children as he could on the mission. But it was just as important to him to teach local surgeons how to perform some of the procedures themselves.

So while Pizarro took the lead in most of the surgeries – including three he did as soon as he got off the plane – he made sure the local surgeons were there to assist. Eventually, they were the ones performing heart surgery, with Pizarro walking them through the delicate process.

"We train these native physicians so there is someone local who can help," said Pizarro, who volunteered for the trip as part of Hearts with Hope, a foundation aiming to teach Latin American medical professionals how to treat and care for children with heart problems.

"The goal is to leave something in place," he said.



Dr. Louis Rafetto

Job: Oral and maxillofacial surgeon in Wilmington

Countries visited: Peru, India, Honduras, Cambodia and Colombia

After five trips overseas on medical missions, Dr. Louis Rafetto has learned a thing or two about volunteering. First, the experience gets in your blood and never leaves. Second, it stretches you far beyond your comfort zone.

The Wilmington oral and maxillofacial surgeon also discovered that some new technologies don't translate well in older cultures. Rafetto and other surgeons learned that while visiting a government-run hospital in India. They brought with them bone plates commonly used here in facial reconstruction surgery, especially trauma cases.

The plan was to give them to surgeons at the hospital. But Rafetto and his colleagues discovered doctors there worked differently than in the United States. "They said they don't treat trauma patients. It wasn't something they did," he said.

Rafetto, who has traveled abroad with Health Volunteers Overseas, said it's those cultural differences he finds so interesting. While on his medical missions, he also has eaten dog meat and tree ants. He has discovered that some countries don't think impacted wisdom teeth are a big deal like they are in the United States. And he has seen doctors not even bat an eye at the sight of pus coming out of a patient's wound from a postsurgical typhoid infection. Rafetto, on the other hand, had never even seen typhoid before, let alone after surgery.

"I think one of the added benefits of this whole experience is that you get to see things you wouldn't

otherwise see," he said. "You learn you have to be flexible."



Kathy Chupp

Job: Outpatient nurse, Nanticoke Memorial Hospital in Seaford
Countries visited: Ecuador and India

It was called "The Flying Hospital" because that's what it was. And Kathy Chupp was on board to help.

Chupp, a nurse at Nanticoke Memorial Hospital, made two trips on the specially equipped jumbo jet – one in 1997 to Quayquil, Ecuador, and one in 1998 to Hyderabad, India – as part of her volunteer service with Operation Blessing.

The nonprofit humanitarian organization no longer uses The Flying Hospital, but at the time it was something to see. Imagine a double-decker plane big enough to hold six operating suites – three for cataract surgeries, two for dental procedures and one for cosmetic repairs such as cleft palates. There also was a pharmacy and a teaching area.

Chupp's job was in recovery. She stayed with cataract patients and children undergoing cosmetic procedures. It was a busy place, since about 40 cataract surgeries were done each day of the two-week mission.

One of the youngest cataract patients was an 8-year-old girl who lived with her grandmother. She was blinded by the condition at an early age. As the doctor removed the patches from her eyes, he held a toy airplane in his hand as a gift for his young charge. Her enormous smile at the sight of the toy conveyed the success of the surgery.

"It was so exciting to see that as a result of what was done for her she could see again," said Chupp, 57, of Seaford. "He was showing her this airplane, and it was just a thrill for this little girl to be able to see it."



Dr. Robert Arm

Job: Director of general practice dentistry residency program at Wilmington Hospital
Countries visited: Vietnam, China and Moldova

Cultural awareness is one of Dr. Robert Arm's main goals when he volunteers overseas. For him, that means knowing that some cultures might object to a typical American toothbrush with its plastic handle and bristles. They might prefer a natural toothbrush made from a wooden stick and similar to descriptions of oral cleaners in the Koran.

"You don't want to be portrayed as the ugly American," said Arm, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon who works at Wilmington Hospital. "When you appreciate their culture, they appreciate you more."

During his medical trips, Arm has lectured to other doctors and helped start dental curriculum for schools as well as preventive programs in Vietnam, China and Moldova, part of the former Soviet Union. He also has treated patients with facial pain, mouth lesions and those in need of tooth extractions.

In each country he has visited, he said, there has been a back-and-forth exchange of information, so

he's learning from them as they learn from him. In Vietnam, he came back with detailed information about SARS. In China, it was avian flu. And in Moldova, he saw the effects from the Chernobyl nuclear accident.

Working with patients is always a highlight because you can see how much of a difference you can make, he said.

"Seeing smiles on the children's faces is worth any money in the world," said Arm, who has worked with Operation Smile in Vietnam.



Dr. Paul Sabini

Job: Facial plastic surgeon in Newark
Countries visited: El Salvador and Ecuador

Each summer when Dr. Paul Sabini sees a former patient from one of his medical missions to Quito, Ecuador, he takes careful note of their grooming and jewelry. If it's a boy, he checks to see whether his hair is cropped short. If it's a girl, he looks for earrings.

Short hair and earrings are signs that the delicate surgery they underwent to construct a new ear can be considered a success, said Sabini, a Newark plastic surgeon. It shows that the kids are comfortable enough to show off what was once a source of embarrassment and shame.

Sabini has made five trips to Quito to treat patients with microtia, a disfiguring condition in which a child is born with a malformed or missing ear.

Worldwide, microtia is a rare condition. But in Quito, a city that sits 11,000 feet above sea level, it's four to five times more common than elsewhere. The city's altitude is believed to be a cause, as is genetics.

Sabini travels to Quito as part of a medical mission group called HUGS, or Help Us Gather Smiles. The group mostly does work on children with cleft palates and lips, but Sabini is one of a few plastic surgeons who treat microtia patients.

The operation to surgically construct a deformed or missing ear takes place in stages. The first stage is the most dangerous because it involves removing rib cartilage from the child to fashion an ear. From there, the created ear is attached to the side of the head, an earlobe also is created, and skin grafts are added to make the ear look more real.

The kids undergoing surgery to repair microtia are a hardy lot, making them even more endearing, said Sabini, 39. "This operation is about as painful as it gets, and yet most of them are taking only Tylenol by the second day," he said.

Sabini will always have a soft spot for his first microtia patient, Santos, a boy born with two missing ears. The first time Sabini saw him, Santos was wearing a New York Yankees ball cap.

Santos lives in the rainforest and even tried to kill himself because of the teasing he took from kids and even teachers at school. It took five years – last August was his final surgery – to correct his microtia.

Next year Sabini will be back in Quito to check on Santos to see just how long his hair is.

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