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### MISSIONS OF MERCY

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Dr. Frank Miller saw thyroids the size of softballs in Malawi.

Dental students from the University of Louisville met villagers in Belize who were hesitant to smile because they had no front teeth.

Indigent Filipino children with congenital clefts traveled some 12 hours for help from Dr. Mark Chariker.

The people and their medical maladies are what compel many professionals from Louisville to donate their time, talent and money to help patients in developing countries.[UTF8]EF81B8[/UTF8]

"It really has something to do with giving back to others less fortunate for all of the privileges we've been blessed with (in America)," said Dr. Gordon Tobin, a plastic surgeon, whose volunteer trips include Romania, China and extensive work treating burn victims in Vietnam. "We don't have any idea how poor and harsh the Third World living experience is."

When Miller, a general surgeon, spent six months in Ghana's bush in the early 1980s, the hospital where he worked lacked electricity and running water.

"They'd fire up the generator when I operated," recalled Miller, who has been to numerous countries since his first trip to Tanzania in 1968 as a medical student. "I was the only surgeon. If someone needed surgery, it didn't get done unless I did it."

Chariker recalls his January trip to the Philippines, where he and other medical personnel often did three to four surgeries in the same operating room.

"That is not allowed in the U.S.," said Chariker, a plastic surgeon whose trips mainly involve repairing cleft lips and palates.

More often than not, folks in struggling countries simply wouldn't receive the health care they needed if it weren't for the generosity of others.

"Medical personnel are fortunate because they are able to (help) directly," Tobin said. "Lots of people contribute to worthwhile organizations, but I think we feel fortunate to be able to do it with our own hands and skills and see results."

The dentists

When Jennifer Wilson thinks back to her week of dental service in the Mayan village of Red Bank, Belize, she recalls people who were overjoyed to have their teeth worked on.

"Some people came and would sit there all day long and wait — they didn't complain once," said Wilson, a second-year dental student at the University of Louisville who visited the country for 10 days during spring break.

Each year, a group of students, supervised by Dr. Thomas Clark and others, visits one of two villages in Belize as part of the International Student Learning Program. The students get hands-on experience, performing screenings, extractions and fillings; the residents in remote areas get care they'd otherwise never see.

"Several people had lost all the teeth in the front of their mouths, so we made flippers (temporary dentures) that clip into

the back teeth and provide fake teeth in the front," said Andrew Williamson, 25, a fourth-year student from Columbia, Tenn. "Then when they smiled, they'd have all their teeth."

The team often worked upward of 10 hours a day.

While some fundraising efforts are made during the year to help support the trips, students often fork over their own money to go. This year, they each paid about \$1,600.

This year marked the second such journey for Seth Ernstberger, a fourth-year student from Muncie, Ind. One of the best parts about returning to Red Bank, he said, was that children remembered him and would specifically request him as their caregiver.

"I came to dental school knowing I wanted to make it a well-rounded four years," Ernstberger said. "I didn't want it to be all books, all clinics. This (trip) was the perfect marriage of qualities: community service, international travel and the people I met were wonderful — I wanted to get to know them better."

Clark, a clinical professor who also oversees dental missions to Gales Point, Belize, said the results have been measurable since the program began in 2002.

"We know for a fact that in the time we've been going to Gales Point, we've had an absolutely positive, measurable effect on the health of that village," he said. "When we first started, all we did was take out teeth, but now they are more interested in hanging on to what they've got and restorative work. We are seeing less acute work, and overall dental health has improved significantly."

"We just got started in the village of Red Bank, but this year was different than last year. We still did a lot of extractions, but we started doing more fillings and replacing teeth with flippers."

In gratitude, the villagers sometimes offered volunteers tokens of their appreciation in the form of friendship bracelets, coconuts, tortillas or bananas. "Part of the reason I wanted to do dentistry is because there's need everywhere," Wilson said. "It's great ... knowing that I could help them out."

The general surgeon

Miller has traveled to more countries to do gratis work than many people have vacationed in their lifetimes. With visits that include China, Nigeria, El Salvador and Cambodia among many others, Miller has seen many of the world's medical plights first hand.

As a general surgeon, he handled everything from hernias and broken bones to tumors and bowel separations. His most recent trip was for about two weeks in January, when he went to Lilongwe, Malawi, to work at a 400-bed hospital.

"Basically, there were the same problems you see here, but much bigger in numbers and much further advanced," said Miller, who visited the African country with two other Louisville doctors. "Here, they'd be treated (early). But there are just huge numbers of people (to treat) because they don't have anywhere else to go. The hospital was full and booming with patients. I'd operate all day, every day."

Miller's Tanzania trip lasted three months, and he went to Ghana for six months after finishing his general residency. The rest of his pilgrimages have been shorter.

He looks back on his time in El Salvador and Vietnam — where he helped educate emerging doctors — as particularly productive because eventually that knowledge would go straight back into helping those communities.

"When you go places for two or three weeks, they really need a specialist more than they need a guy like me, especially if you go to a city," said Miller, adding that the harshest living conditions he's seen, by far, were in Africa.

Still, that has not deterred him from making other hands-on, service-oriented journeys, perhaps because "you think of all these people dying of things they wouldn't die from in the United States."

Miller said the severe realities he's seen are humbling.

"You do some individual good, in that if I wasn't around (some people) would have died," he said. "When I left Ghana, they had no surgeon to replace me, and I don't know what the hell happened. In that regard, it's made a big personal impact on me. But to say I've helped Africa, it's just a drop in the bucket."

### The plastic surgeons

Giving people a chance to lead more normal lives has been the focus of Tobin and Chariker, both plastic surgeons.

Tobin got started in the mid-1980s through a group called Operation Smile, a private, not-for-profit volunteer medical service organization in its 25th year. His destination was Vietnam, where "we organized a team to address a specific need that wasn't being met at all: burn victims," said Tobin, who has also traveled to Romania and China to work.

According to the Philippine-based National Institute of Burns, children make up at least 50 percent of burn victims and half are younger than 5 years old. Eighty percent of victims come from poor and low-income households, and the burns are caused by a range of mishaps, including cooking accidents, gas flames and chemicals.

So from the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s, Tobin returned to Vietnam to help make a dent in the care problem. At first, they did operations. But eventually, the focus switched to educating Vietnamese doctors.

"I enjoyed doing these (trips), but the concern was that you'd go over there for two weeks and work like mad and do 200 cases — but when you left, it stopped," said Tobin, whose recent plans to volunteer in Afghanistan were canceled at the last minute because of elevated security issues.

"We wanted to set up something that would be going on after we left, so it became more of a focus on teaching. We had and still have very advanced burn care here in Louisville. Our return trips were always to the same four centers in Vietnam, so we could school them and move them to more advanced levels of care and see the results of our efforts."

It was the gift that kept giving.

"Their medical system is really saving people that would have died before," he said.

Chariker, meanwhile, travels with Operation Hope to Philippine villages. Congenital cleft disorders affect one in 500 babies in developing countries, and can result in problems such as ear disease, dental issues and speech development.

"One of the problems with congenital clefts is that they become reclusive and they're not as functional in society," said Chariker, who has been doing the missions since 1993. "It seems like a very simple problem, but it affects many aspects of their lives."

Along with a team of more than 50 medical personnel, including others from Louisville, he estimates some 30 surgeries are performed each day during shifts that last upward of 12 hours.

"I call it my reality check every year," Chariker said. "It puts my feet back on the ground and reminds me of what's important. Helping the underprivileged is how we all advance as a society."

Reporter Maisy Fernandez can be reached at (502) 582-4502.

### HOW TO HELP

You don't have to be a health professional to help people in need.

Locally, the Greater Louisville Medical Society operates a program called Supplies Overseas (SOS) and always needs help.

SOS collects unused medical supplies from hospitals, clinics, companies and individuals, which are shipped to 70 different countries and donated to doctors volunteering abroad.

Volunteers are always needed to pick up, sort, repackage and ship the items. You can also donate funds, supplies and equipment.

For more information, visit [www.suppliesoverseas.org](http://www.suppliesoverseas.org)

On the Web

Operation Hope: [www.pageshope.com](http://www.pageshope.com)

Operation Smile: [www.operationsmile.org](http://www.operationsmile.org)

U of L's International Service Learning Program: <http://louisville.edu/student/islp>

INFORMATIONAL GRAPHIC; CHART THAT SHOWS KENTUCKY DOCTORS OVERSEAS (SEE LIBRARY MICROFILM OR LIBRARY PDF PAGES)

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