



Medical missionaries serve the world

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By Ricki Lindsay, correspondent

Southwest Florida is rich in medical resources easily taken for granted. Many local health care professionals volunteer substantial time, effort and resources to serving the medically needy, here and in underdeveloped countries all over the world.

For some, it is a matter of faith; for others it is at the heart of why they became physicians and health care workers in the first place. All agree on one thing: These missions are transformational for them and those they help.

Washington C. Hill

A chance conversation in the doctors' lounge at Sarasota Memorial Hospital about 10 years ago was the beginning of medical mission work for



Patients await care from the McCabe family at an eye clinic on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent. (Photo provided)

Washington Hill, a physician specializing in perinatology — maternal and fetal health and care of women with high-risk pregnancies.

Since that time, he has completed at least a dozen trips to Africa, most of them with local medical missionary group, Hearts Afire. Hearts Afire assembles a team that may include physicians, nurses, medical technicians and lay people and performs the necessary advance groundwork to assist in clinics in the underserved countries.

“Sometimes, we are in places without electricity or generators, so we work sunrise to sundown. The people in the surrounding villages would hear that we were coming and they would travel by foot for miles to see us,” notes Hill.

He was recruited to Sarasota in 1992 to develop Sarasota Memorial’s high-risk pregnancy program. After 21 years in that role, Hill asked himself, “Have I done all that I want to do?”

“I had been very busy and successful,” he says, “but I knew that I wanted to go to Africa and continue helping the people there, so I looked around for the best opportunity to do that.”

He recently completed a two-year commitment to work in Rwanda, teaching medical students there, working in the 400-bed teaching hospital in the capital city of Kigali. For those two years, Dr. Hill was part of the faculty of Duke University under the Human Resources for Health program.

Rwanda was the site of a horrendous genocide 21 years ago that wiped out most of the country's physicians, nurses and other professionals, who were either killed or fled the country during the brutality.

"After the genocide, there was no infrastructure left for medical care; it was total devastation," Hill says. "They had to start all over to educate citizens who could become health care workers and physicians."

Launched in 2012, the Human Resources for Health program has been working to rebuild the health care workforce and medical education programs of Rwanda.

"The hospital in Kigali wasn't anything like what we are accustomed to here, but you learn to make the adjustment and work with what they have and to respect their customs and traditions," Hill says. "I know that the team and I have made a difference in the lives of the people of that country. We have tried to introduce change, but we always try to do it in a way that is respectful and will be well-received."

After his two years in Rwanda, Hill has returned to Sarasota to work for the Florida Department of Health, providing services in obstetrics, gynecology and high-risk pregnancy from offices on Ringling Boulevard and in North Port.

"I work with an underserved population here and in North Port. These folks need the care and are most appreciative of it," he says. "I am so fortunate to have been born in this country. I am going to keep doing what I do for as long as I can."

Cathleen McCabe

What started out as a mission trip during her medical internship 20 years ago has turned into an ongoing commitment and family affair for Sarasota ophthalmologist and eye surgeon Cathleen McCabe.

That first trip — 20 years ago during her general medical internship year — was to Belize, with her husband, Dave, and two very young daughters. Since then, all five of her children and an exchange student who lived with the family have participated in these trips, usually to the island of St. Vincent, north of Trinidad and Tobago — one of the poorest islands in the Caribbean, known as the filming location for the movie "Pirates of the Caribbean."

"These have been very rewarding experiences for all of us, especially for the kids," notes McCabe, recalling that her then-15-year-old son Max described the hot, long days at the clinic on St. Vincent as "the best vacation I have ever



Eye surgeon Cathleen McCabe works on St. Vincent with the island's only ophthalmologist, Orly Adams. (Photo provided)

had.”

Dave McCabe participates in every trip, managing the clinic, conducting eye exams and dispensing glasses. Dr. McCabe mainly performs cataract surgery and some corneal transplants. The clinic runs for five full days, treating roughly 150 island residents selected by the island's sole ophthalmologist, Orly Adams.

“Dr. Adams performs the pre- and post-operative care, and we work with him on current medical trends in eye care as part of our educational support,” McCabe notes. “The educational aspect is so important to what we do.”

The clinic on St. Vincent is partially supported by the Lions Club of St. Vincent's and the Lions Club of Fort Wayne, Indiana. McCabe practiced in Fort Wayne for 10 years before moving to Sarasota in 2010 to work for The Eye Associates, a Bradenton practice.

In September, she will be traveling to Kenya for the first time.

“I am very excited about that,” she says. “These trips are extremely rewarding all the way around, and I know there is a lot of need out there.”

Vilma Vega

As a young girl in Chicago, Vilma Vega thought that to fulfill her desire to be a missionary, she would have to become a nun.



Infectious disease specialist Vilma Vega holds a baby in Haiti. (Photo provided)

“I thought only nuns were missionaries, until my father gave me the vision to become a physician first and then serve the mission field,” she says. “It was good advice.”

An infectious disease specialist, Vega went on her first mission trip in 2005 and has completed more than 30 since then, all through Hearts Afire, which she co-founded in 2005 with Bradenton vascular surgeon Joe Pecororo.

“We are a Christian organization, but people of all faiths join us on these trips,”

Vega says.

Hearts Afire is currently in the process of completing a hospital in El Doret, Kenya, primarily for outpatient services and labor and delivery. Trips can vary from six to 50 in the number of participants. The majority are from Sarasota and Manatee counties, including students from the local Florida State University College of Medicine campus.

“With all of the distractions that physicians face today — electronic health records, hassles with insurance companies, changes in the way medicine is practiced — it can make us callous. I feel as though most of us have been taken away from why we became doctors in the first place: to serve our fellow man,” says Vega. “These trips have a way of bringing physicians and others back to their foundations. I see such a rejuvenation of the spirit in those who participate.”

Vega came to Sarasota from her work at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami to head up the Community Medical Clinic, now the Community AIDS Network. After serving for 10 years as the medical director, she is now the chief medical officer.

“I believe that the only legacy that we have in this world is to make a change for the better in other people’s lives, something that will go forward in history,” she says. “As in epidemiology — where every disease starts with one person and explodes and evolves from there — each one of us can transform lives. And there really can be a field of people changing the world.”

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