

Overcoming barriers

Student juggles demands of school and ten medical mission trips



By Kristine Ottosen, P-4 student

People often ask me how I found the opportunities to serve on 10 medical mission trips in four different countries in the past two years of pharmacy school. The honest answer is they found me.

It all began through a discussion about my pharmacy career path with a driver on my first non-medical mission trip to Mexico. He mentioned the need for help in the pharmacy of an upcoming Mexico medical mission trip, and a few weeks later I found myself beginning a journey I never would have imagined. Everything I experienced and witnessed was like nothing I had ever seen before.

From the small snapshot glimpsed through my photos, two of my classmates became inspired and joined me on my next trip. The leader of this trip saw value in student participation and approached me and another student to coordinate everything involved with increasing student participation. So much interest was generated towards the trips that we had to set a cap on the number of students we could take. A waiting list was established for upcoming trips.

A student that participated in another of the Mexico medical missions asked if I would be willing to incorporate the Mexico trips into the newly founded UT chapter of HOPE, an organization that hosts global medical mission trips. I was elated at the opportunity and soon found myself leading two international HOPE medical mission trips to Africa and Costa Rica.

While in Africa, a student on the trip asked me, "Why are you still going on these trips when you are already in pharmacy school? You do not need to boost your resume anymore."

For some, boosting a resume may be all it is about. For others, it may start out that way, but after seeing the magnitude of their impact they realize the potential they have to make a difference once they become licensed healthcare professionals.

For me it goes a step further. I see a need for sustainability. Today's leaders can direct medical missions for only so long. If this work is to continue, a new generation of leaders, many of them currently students, must step forward to become the future of these trips.

It makes my day to receive e-mails from strangers, friends and family asking how they can get involved in the trips. Being able to help them get involved and witnessing within them the spark of passion for serving is a beautiful sight.

Even more beautiful is the overwhelming gratitude of the families we serve. Never did I imagine that I would see patients smiling and waving during a tooth extraction or waiting in line for hours without a single complaint.

The tears of gratitude that streamed down the face of an elderly patient as I walked her back to her home said it all.

I did not need to understand the few words she spoke. I felt how fragile she was as I held her arm, and it was in that



Ottosen draws inspiration from patients she serves.

moment that I realized that we really are addressing the needs of hundreds of patients that would not otherwise receive medical care.

I was reminded again of the impact these trips make when I met an elderly Panamanian patient who had gone more than a year without treatment after being diagnosed with tuberculosis. The nearest clinic to his village was a difficult two-hour walk through winding mountainside roads. He had no other mode of transportation and could not afford the medical treatment. As a result of our home-visits, we were able to provide transportation to the clinic and funding to ensure that the patient received treatment.

I remember counseling my first patient in Mexico and thinking, “How am I ever going to be able to connect with my patients when I barely know any Spanish?” It was through a little girl proudly showing me a picture she colored that I realized it was as easy as reaching out and trying.

“Oo me gusta! Qual es tu nombre?” (Oo, I like! What is your name?), I asked with the little Spanish I knew. She responded, but after switching our names tags I said, “No, mira, tu nombre es Kristine!” (No, look! Your name is Kristine!)

It took her a second and before I knew what happened, she wrapped her arms around me with the biggest hug. She ran around the clinic the rest of the day with a grin from ear-to-ear tugging on everyone’s shirts saying, “Mira! Mira! Mi nombre es Kristine!”

In another completely non-verbal instance, I managed to persuade a group of young Honduran girls to take a goofy moose-antler picture by pointing to the shirt of one of the girls. The shirt said “Duck, Duck, Moose” with the corresponding animals; putting my hands behind my head was enough for them to understand. A string of goofy photos and giggles followed, still without a word exchanged. A tradition was born that day and I have been blessed to have the same memorable interaction with groups of kids from every country I have served.

In pharmacy, we discuss the various barriers that keep us from reaching patients with limited access to care, lack of finances and language barriers among the most difficult to surpass. Rather than simply discussing them, these trips allow us to actively break down those barriers in scenarios we often hear about, but never really get to see.



Kristine Ottosen, right, works with another volunteer in the pharmacy on one of her 10 medical mission trips.

What many do not realize is that we do not have to travel to the ends of the world to find areas with such a need as the villages in Senegal and Costa Rica. It exists right in our own town. Local organizations, such as The Volunteer Clinic, Scared Heart Community Clinic and Auxanomen, have realized this and need our help.

I have lost count of how many times I have heard of people who have wanted to participate in trips like this but had something holding them back. I faced my own financial barriers and time restraints, but I was able to fundraise and balance my time in order to overcome and participate. Let us overcome our barriers in order to give hope to those who cannot overcome theirs.



Kristine Ottosen and other student volunteers on a medical mission trip make the sign of a moose to bond with local children.