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Helping the World's Poor

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Helping the world's poor



Jake Crevistan '08 lets a Cameroon boy listen to his heartbeat during a health screening. Linfield students conducted health screenings, delivered babies, and treated typhoid and many other diseases during a January Term class in Cameroon, working with a health organization run by Ruth (Musunu) Titi Manyaka '69.

What began as a health screening project for orphans ended with eye-opening lessons on the struggles facing some of the world's most vulnerable people.

Fourteen Linfield College students spent January Term in Cameroon, conducting health screenings and much more for Women, Environment and Health (WEH), a non-governmental organization devoted to serving the needs of women, orphans and vulnerable children. It was founded in 1999 by Ruth (Musunu) Titi Manyaka '69, who invited the Linfield students to help with the program. (See related story on page 20.)

Although the class was rewarding and challenging, it was also emotionally and physically draining. Students saw poverty and disease in ways they had never before experienced.

The majority of the students were nursing or health science majors from the Portland Campus, although a few were from McMinnville.

The students conducted assessments on orphaned and vulnerable children in the local villages, taking temperatures, blood pressures and pulse and heart rates, and documenting the villagers' vaccinations, diet and use of mosquito nets. The assessments established a database for WEH to track the health of the local children.

But the students' experiences went far beyond that.

"We delivered babies, treated typhoid, saw gangrene and started IV treatments for patients suffering from

malaria," said Joe Romero '07.

They also observed or helped with emergency surgeries, set a broken arm and gave away over-the-counter medicines they carried to Cameroon in their luggage. In many cases, they used their own money to help those who were the sickest.

Hollie Saulie-Rohman '08 spent part of the class in a hospital shadowing the staff and helping take care of patients. She observed surgeries and births in conditions that would be considered unsanitary here.

"They do a great job with what they have, which isn't much," she said. "We saw so much happiness in some horrible conditions, that it made me re-evaluate my life and made me wonder if I value material things too much."

Communicating was a challenge. French is the dominant language, so Linfield students were teamed up with students from a Cameroon nursing school to assist with translations.

As word spread that the students were there, many from surrounding villages came each day, seeking treatment. In many cases, the students had little to offer but their kindness and ability to listen.

Six months after she returned, Michelle Gibson '08, is still haunted by the face of one severely deformed child, desperate for medical attention. She continues searching for an organization willing to help. When an HIV-positive woman shared with Gibson, the mother of three children, her desire to have another child, Gibson realized she could not apply her Western values in meeting the needs of her patient.

"That's when I realized that the patient is the most important thing," she said. "In nursing, I am going to come across many people who, for reasons based on religion or culture or society or economics, may choose a different path than I. I didn't realize how much I really do embrace that until I met that woman."

Jake Crevistan '08 said the experience crystallized for him how closely education and health care are linked and how one can't really exist effectively without the other.

"I learned how to dig deeper and question how our actions actually affect another culture, another people," he said. "I think there is a fine balance between the two."

The students came face-to-face with a culture that was very different from their own, said David Groff, one of the course professors and director of the Portland Campus.

"They were faced with how differently some people live and the kinds of chances that they have," he said. "They related really well to the children and they showed a high degree of professionalism and care for the children and their patients."

— *Mardi Mileham*