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Helping the Poorest of the Poor in Africa

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Service at home and abroad

Helping the poorest of the poor in Africa

Two years ago, Tara Lepp stepped off a plane into a country that would change her life. Now she's hoping to change the lives of Linfield College students as well, by sharing her African experiences.

Lepp, professor of health and human performance and head athletic trainer, spent two weeks in Rwanda as part of a medical mission team with Open Arms International, providing health care to approximately 800 children. She returned last summer, this time for a month, dividing her time between Rwanda and Kenya.

"It is our desire to find the poorest of the poor and make a difference in their lives," Lepp said. "We try to find the street children, and in Africa there are millions."

Surrounded by poverty, severe malnourishment and serious health problems, Lepp assisted nurses and doctors in medical clinics and ran the pharmacy, all the while entertaining children and families awaiting care.

A member of the Linfield faculty since 1982, Lepp is taking her work in Africa into the classroom. On her most recent trip, she began research on traditional healing methods, thanks to the support of a Linfield faculty development grant. She has incorporated part of that information into a class, Complementary Healing Methods,

which examines the effect of prayer, humor and animals on the healing process. The course also explores healing methods used in other cultures. She plans to develop a travel course during which students can work in a medical facility in Eldoret, Kenya.

In Rwanda, people are dealing not only with poverty, but also with the emotional trauma of the 1994 genocide. During a period of about 100 days, two extremist Hutu militia groups massacred approximately 1 million ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda. Lepp commonly met orphans whose parents were killed during the genocide.

"Everybody I've met in Rwanda has been affected by the genocide in some way," Lepp said. "One-eighth of Rwanda's 8 million citizens were slaughtered. Twelve years later, they're still trying to recover and heal from that. They have a long way to go."

Still, Lepp was encouraged by the improvements since her last visit. Open Arms International partners with indigenous ministries to support local residents, and Lepp saw a new school, orphanage and water tank built since her first trip.

Lepp has spent the past two decades combining her medical skills with mission work. In 1986, she made her first of two trips to Scandinavia with Athletes in Action and has been hooked ever since. She traveled to Russia twice with Josh McDowell Ministries, and has worked in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Lepp admits she struggles with the contrast between her work in the United States and Africa. At Linfield, she provides health care for basically healthy young athletes. In Africa, her work literally saves lives.

"It's changed my life," she said. "I know my life's calling is to help relieve suffering in the world; in particular, to try to help improve the health care in Africa and give them the hope of Jesus."

— Laura Davis



Tara Lepp, professor of health and human performance and head athletic trainer, spent a month in Rwanda and Kenya providing health care to local residents. Here, she works with a dental hygienist to treat a young boy with a mouth infection.