Digging into Disaster Relief

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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 for an orphaned child 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 26.)

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.

“Helping the world’s poor has made me wish I could go back and help more,” she said.

“People were going without food, shelter, transportation and clothing,” said Lee. “I think there is a fine balance between the two.”

“We do a great job with what they have, which isn’t much,” she said. “We saw so much happiness in some horrifying 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.

“It was an interesting subsection of my experience,” he said. “Seeing everything how it relates to 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 Milcham

Digging into disaster relief

In 2005, millions of people watched from afar as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita turned the world upside down for Gulf Coast residents.

Rob Gardner, assistant professor of sociology who is studying grassroots responses to disasters, has traveled to Louisiana three times since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck the Gulf Coast in 2005.

“People were going without food, shelter, transportation and clothing,” he said. “The smaller relief organizations were able to respond in a more agile way than traditional models.”

Since that first trip, Gardner has returned to Louisiana twice. In March 2006, he worked with Linfield students to “muck and gut” decaying homes. And this year, he and Ed Gans, assistant professor of mass communication, co-led a January Term class there to study community change and the role of mass media during the storms.

After returning from his third trip in January 2007, Gardner said, “We delivered babies, treated typhoid and many other diseases. We saw poverty and disease in ways they had never before experienced. Many were retired, students or people in a transitional phase.”

— Laura Davis

It was the same type of setting I would have experienced in a bluegrass festival,” he said. “People making do with what they had, creating temporary tent shelters for people to share food, music and community.”

Volunteers came from around the country to help fill the gap left by national agencies.

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Thanks to a Linfield collaborative research grant, Gardner and sociology major Kate Lee ’08 spent the summer surveying volunteers online to learn about their motivations and experiences. They found the majority of volunteers traveled more than 1,000 miles and most came from large cities.

Many were retirees, students or people in a transitional phase.

“For Lee, who took part in both the Linfield alternative spring break and the January Term class, the trips have been life changing. She came away with a love for the area and the people, but more than that, the experience has focused her goals. She is interested in housing issues and hopes to bolster her experiences with an internship next year.

Ironically, the most difficult part of the trips for Lee was returning home.

“Seeing everything how it should be and remembering our work made me wish I could go back and help more,” she said.

— Laura Davis

Thousands of volunteers staffed relief centers such as this Emergency Communities site in Waveland, Miss., after the hurricanes in 2005. Gardner, who spent a month at the Made with Love Café in Arabi, La., during January 2006, returned in January 2007 with a group of Linfield students.