

## **Going Back to Basics**

*by Karel Juhl*

Christine Jack, DO, spent her two-week vacation in the Caribbean this past spring. A ship's cabin, three meals a day, and plenty of good, clean water were hers for the bargain price of \$350.

Still, it was a cruise many of us would rather not book.

Jack, serving her internal medicine residency at Blodgett and St. Mary's hospitals in Grand Rapids, is part of a passionate group of physicians who spend their vacations working in Third World countries – and pay for the privilege.

“I've been interested in medical missions since I got into medical school,” Jack said. Last summer she attended a week-long training course on working in developing nations, sponsored by a Texas-based organization called Mercy Ships. There, she received a crash course in everything from orthopedics to dental care, and from protecting herself against infectious diseases to caring for people with supplies and medicines available in Third World countries.

Despite the preparation, heading out for her first tour in Guatemala was a scary proposition. Just getting to the ship, the *Caribbean Mercy*, was an adventure. The commercial flight she and her 14-year-old daughter took landed in Guatemala City, but the ship was docked on the country's eastern coast. That meant a six-hour cross-

country trip on a local bus that stopped about every mile. “My Spanish isn’t too strong, but my daughter’s is, thank goodness! She got us across Guatemala.”

Aboard ship, Jack’s job was crew physician. “The crew is made up of about 150 people who are in the Third World all the time, so their ability to get good health care is very difficult. My job was to keep the crew going.” Each member of the international crew is a volunteer, and many bring their families. An on-board school is available, beginning with pre-school and going all the way through high school graduation.

In addition to her crew duties, Jack had plenty of opportunities to see how important – and rare – good medicine is to the people of Guatemala. “There would be a line of people outside the ship at 5 a.m., having walked two days just to see us. It’s an incredible sight.”

### **Laboring to ease the hunger and the pain**

Mercy Ships owns and operates three relief vessels which sail to areas of natural disaster and chronic need. One, the *Anastasis*, is the largest non-governmental hospital ship in the world, with three fully-equipped operating rooms, dental clinic, laboratory and X-ray unit. Optical clinics offer eye exams, and donated, used glasses mean sight for countless adults and children.

Bing Henderson, DO, has served with Mercy Ships for nearly seven years, and recently began another one-year assignment aboard the *Anastasis* in Africa. He is joined, as usual, by his wife, a nursing coordinator who works alongside him. Two of their children continue to make the journey, while a third now attends college in the U.S.

Henderson, who previously practiced family medicine in Ohio, spent his first four years with Mercy Ships as physician to the 400 crew members. Two years ago he

became village clinic coordinator, and now works off ship in the villages, doing primary medical and health care and community health education.

Many would consider such service as too great a personal and professional sacrifice, but Henderson sees things differently. “We see people with cleft lip or palate who have no means of having that repaired except by people like us,” he said. “The rewards of taking care of someone like that far surpass the things that are left behind in the States. When people’s lives are changed by the things we do, we can think of no greater reward. The cost is far outweighed by the benefits.”

The Christian-based Mercy Ships mission is three-fold: relief, training and ministry. “The ship does offer some evangelism,” Christine Jack said, “but you can’t teach somebody about the Lord without first taking care of their needs. If someone is hungry or in pain, they’re not going to be able to accept anything else.

“Here in the First World, it isn’t common to see a patient for the first time with very advanced illnesses,” she continued, “but there you see things in very late stages. People in their 30s and 40s come to us with conditions not seen here until people are in their 70s or 80s.”

### **An incredible challenge**

So Mercy Ship volunteers labor to ease the hunger and the pain. They’ve installed irrigation systems, while teaching the people to build and repair their own systems. In March, volunteers made repairs to a pediatric hospital. “Conditions there were so sad. These children have easily correctable conditions that will never be corrected.”

Yet many people can be helped. Cataract surgery that would normally take an entire year’s wages can be obtained free from Mercy Ships volunteer physicians. (The ship’s cost: \$15.) Last year, the *Caribbean Mercy* provided \$4.5 million worth of free health care to 27,000 people.

Christine Jack leaves December 28 for another tour aboard the *Caribbean Mercy*. Next year, she'd like to go to the Dominican Republic. When she completes her residency in June, she hopes to find work that allows her the time and funds to continue her mission work. ("I'm looking for a job – put that in your article," she added with a laugh, only half joking.) Each trip uses up her personal vacation time, and out-of-pocket costs can quickly add up to \$2,500 per trip.

When asked what she'd personally like to accomplish with her volunteerism, Jack is unsure how to answer. "I've never thought of it from a personal standpoint, I guess. I feel that being raised in the First World, having the knowledge base I've been given and trained in, that there is a certain obligation to give back. Not from a Christian background, but from a medical background.

"Serving in a Third World country is a renewal. It takes you back to the basics, back to why most of us first got into medicine. It's an incredible challenge on a scientific mind level, but it's also an incredible challenge to being a human."

Bing Henderson agrees. "It doesn't take a superstar to change a person's life, it only takes a willingness to step outside ourselves to help the poor and needy."

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