

Volunteer Work: A Legacy of Caring

On fall weekends, you can find David Weissberg, M.D., orthopedic surgeon in Huntington, N.Y., sitting on the sidelines watching the intramural competition at one of his local school districts. He's there—rain or shine—as team physician, watching the game and socializing with players and their parents, ready to spur into action if a player gets injured. By donating his time, he's serving his community. But to hear him tell it, he's the one reaping the benefits.

Jack Kenny, M.D., a neonatologist, trades in his stethoscope for a saw for roughly five hours a week. As a volunteer for Habitat for Humanity for the past 12 years, Dr. Kenny helped build almost 75 houses—providing housing for more than 300 people.

“The satisfaction is in interacting with the kids and their parents on the sidelines,” says Dr. Weissberg. “It’s very satisfying watching these kids grow up, go through school, seeing how they interact with their fellow classmates, and seeing what they achieve on the field.”

He finds that, in this non-clinical setting, the players and their parents are more open and relaxed and relate to him in a much different manner from when they see him in his white coat in the office. The experience helps build trust with the community. It has also been an excellent source of referrals for his practice.

Meanwhile in Madison, Wis., Jack Kenny, M.D., a neonatologist, trades in his stethoscope for a saw for roughly five hours a week. As a volunteer for Habitat for Humanity for the past 12 years, Dr. Kenny helped build almost 75 houses—providing housing for more than 300 people.

“I’ve always been interested in woodworking and construction, and was looking for an outlet from my professional career,”

he explains. Since retiring from medicine last year, Dr. Kenny has stepped up his involvement with the organization, working on some week-long projects, such as helping to reconstruct houses in post-Katrina New Orleans. He finds the hands-on construction work gives him a physical and emotional boost.

Last spring, Samuel Weinstein, M.D., got 15 minutes of fame when newswires across the globe ran the story that he had stopped mid-surgery to donate a unit of blood to his 8-year-old patient. The pediatric cardiothoracic surgeon was 12 hours into the delicate procedure when it became evident that they were running low on the boy's blood type: B negative. Dr. Weinstein, who is also B negative, offered his own. The surgery, to replace the child's failing aortic valve with an artificial one, was a success. The next day, Dr. Weinstein had lunch with his young patient.

The surgery took place in El Salvador, where Dr. Weinstein was a volunteer on a medical mission for Heart Care International. The nonprofit organization provides medical and surgical care to children with life-threatening heart conditions and trains local health-care professionals in the medical and surgical management of heart disease. Several times a year for the past decade, Dr. Weinstein has traveled with the organization to developing nations to perform heart surgeries and heart catheterizations.

Each mission reminds him why he chose a medical career.

"Medicine is a great profession, and you forget that sometimes in the U.S., because there are so many headaches in the current environment," says Dr. Weinstein, chief of pediatric cardiothoracic surgery at Children's Hospital at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, N.Y. "What I learn each time is how much I really love to practice medicine. There are few forms to fill out, no insurance companies, no external regulations. It's all about what you think is in the best medical interest of the patient. It's extraordinarily gratifying."

Many people have an innate need to help others. For them volunteering is more than just a monthly, quarterly, or annual obligation. It's a way of life, a way to make their corner of their world a little better.

It's also one of the best ways to develop and use your leadership skills. When you reach out to others, you also pull yourself up and attain new heights of personal satisfaction and growth.

The reasons for volunteering are as diverse as the people who donate their time and the services they provide. Helping others is usually the first motivator, but there are other benefits as well. For physicians just starting out in practice, speaking at community events or participating in health fairs can give them the necessary exposure to build a patient base. For someone new to a neighborhood, local volunteering is a quick route to like-minded people. For a person who loves to travel, volunteering in another country gives a special opportunity to get to know another culture first hand.

Many doctors say they are transformed by their volunteer experience. It taps into their compassionate nature and fills a deep void. Many return from work in developing countries with the realization that they have the power to reshape the quality and delivery of medical care for hundreds, maybe thousands of people.

Some people volunteer through organizations; some do it on a more informal basis, offering to help an elderly person with groceries or helping a neighbor connect with a qualified specialist for a particular health condition. Others integrate community work with their paid employment, such as physicians who see patients from underserved populations in rural areas, inner cities, and immigrant groups.

But no matter how or where you choose to do service, the payback can be huge—as Drs. Weissberg, Kenny, and Weinstein can attest. Like most volunteers, they say the rewards of community service far outweigh the effort. In addition to helping improve lives and communities, volunteering also contributes to their personal growth and satisfaction and the legacy of care they leave behind.

Many doctors say they are transformed by their volunteer experience. It taps into their compassionate nature and fills a deep void. Many return from work in developing countries or with underserved populations in the United States with the realization that they have the power to reshape the quality and delivery of medical care for hundreds, maybe thousands of people.

Dr. Gena Carter understands this concept first hand. Although she suffers from systemic lupus erythematosus, she volunteers at least 10 to 12 hours a month for the American Cancer Society (ACS) and Alliance for Lupus Research in addition to her regu-

lar job at InMed Diagnostic Women's Center in Dedham, Mass. She also serves on the Advisory Board of the National Institute of Arthritis, Musculoskeletal, and Skin Diseases (NIAMS), part of the National Institutes of Health. As a volunteer, she has served in many roles, speaking out on public health issues, providing testimony on Capitol Hill, and advocating for patients.

Her most exciting experience came when she was invited by ACS to join a 13-member delegation to help develop and implement a screening mammography program that would reach one million Chinese women. In addition to radiologists, the team consisted of physicists, cancer surgeons, and other specialists, she says. The meeting was held in Beijing.

"We worked out the logistics of how to screen one million women," she says. "We talked about what works in America and made recommendations for mammography, implementing breast ultrasounds as an addition to screening." The entire project is expected to span six years; the first phase began last year with mobile mammography units visiting rural communities. This

Giving Children a Voice

Volunteer work can give a voice to those who are unable to speak for themselves.

"Children don't write their Congressmen, and there's nobody to speak out about their healthcare issues unless a pediatrician does it," says William Blanchard, M.D., a pediatric cardiologist who is also medical director at Sacred Heart Children's Hospital in Pensacola, Fla., and medical director, division of cardiology, department of pediatrics, at Nemours Children's Clinic—Pensacola.

When Dr. Blanchard moved to Pensacola for his residency program, he was the only pediatric cardiologist in the entire Florida Panhandle. Seeing a need for volunteer work in his own field, he rolled up his sleeves and jumped in. He became involved with the American Heart Association, especially since the organization predominantly focused on adults with coronary disease. Dr. Blanchard began educating the organization and public about children with heart diseases, pointing out, for example, that one out of every 100 children has a birth defect of the heart. Ultimately, he served as president of the AHA's Florida/Puerto Rico chapter in 1999-2000 and received the "Physician of the Year Award 2001" from the AHA.

outreach effort has the potential to produce significant benefits for women, not just in China, but all over the world; one of the goals of the project is to track data regarding the effectiveness of ultrasound screening for breast cancer.

While in Beijing, she also had the opportunity to speak at a global conference to address different aspects of breast imaging and breast cancer.

“I remember standing at the podium, looking out,” says Dr. Carter, who is African-American. “No one else [in the room] looked like me. All of a sudden it dawned on me that this was the most remarkable experience I’ve ever had in my life. I was in a country where I didn’t know the language, didn’t know the people, was truly a minority. It was surreal and wonderful at the same time. It was almost an out-of-body experience. I’ll never forget that moment.”

In a flash, her mind traveled back to her childhood days, when her parents and four brothers lived in a very modest household. She realized how amazing her life’s journey has been and how

“For me, it’s always been an issue of serving and participating in the life of the community,” he says. “One has to always look at children. They have very specific diseases, very specific needs in terms of their growth and development.”

Another physician giving voice to children in need is Marcus DeGraw, M.D., a pediatrician at St. John Hospital’s Children Center in Detroit. In his off-hours, he volunteers for Kids-TALK in Wayne County, Mich. The program created a comprehensive interview process that includes all protocols of various agencies involved in identifying children 12 years or younger who may be victims of sexual abuse. This interview process, which is used for approximately 500 children each year, makes it easier for children to get help since they don’t have to repeat their painful story to numerous individuals from various law enforcement or social service agencies.

“I can’t think of any more helpless beings on the planet than abused children who don’t have anybody to speak for them,” says Dr. DeGraw, who is also a fellowship-trained child abuse expert. “This helps people who can’t help themselves. There’s really not much better feeling than that.”

blessed she was to be in this situation.

“I was so happy and overcome with joy,” she says. “It’s very exciting to be personally and professionally involved in an international project and to be a part of history.”

Smart Choices

Considering there are thousands of different organizations in need of volunteers, how do you know which one makes the best match for you?

Start by asking yourself a few questions, says Stefanie Rubin, director of the International Volunteer Programs Association (www.volunteerinternational.org)—a consortium of 33 organizations that send volunteers overseas. First, consider your goal for volunteering. Do you want to stay in the U.S. or travel abroad? If you want to travel, what part of the country or world attracts you? Do you want to volunteer in a big city or a rural area where you may be working with a small public health clinic?

How do you anticipate volunteerism’s affecting your life? Do you want to integrate volunteer work into your regular routine, or are you looking for a break from the day-to-day? Are you donating your time and skills to escape a stressful job or perhaps a family situation? Are you planning on strengthening your skills in a particular area or using the experience to explore other career opportunities? How do you want this experience to impact you in the near and distant future?

Perhaps the closest volunteer opportunities are within the community relations department or communications office of a hospital you’re affiliated with. The staff members of these offices organize seminars, health fairs, health screenings, speaking engagements, and other community outreach events. Often physicians can design their own programs based on needs they see in the community. For example, David Reynolds, M.D., gastroenterologist in Honesdale, Pa., became concerned when he diagnosed five young people in the rural town with hepatitis B in the span of just a few weeks. He approached the community relations department of Wayne Memorial Hospital, where he’s on staff, asking if there was anything he could do to help get the message about risk factors out to teenagers in the area. He worked with the community health nurse to find a dynamic

speaker (a former drug addict with HIV and hepatitis B) and design a workshop on the topic. They presented the program to 11th graders in three school districts—more than 1,500 students in all.

Free clinics for the uninsured may offer another close-to-home opportunity for ongoing volunteer work. There are many inde-

pendent clinics scattered across the nation. Others are part of national networks, such as Volunteers in Medicine Institute (VIMI). Started in 1992 by a retired physician in Hilton Head, S.C., who had the vision of serving the uninsured, VIMI has now opened 50 free clinics across the country. The organization's Website (www.vimi.org) lists the clinics and even includes information on how to start a clinic in your own community.

Although opportunities abound close to home, many physicians want to volunteer in developing countries where their modern medical knowledge is desperately needed. These opportunities not only offer a route for helping others; they also present a special opportunity for travel.

Although opportunities abound close to home, many physicians want to volunteer in developing countries where their modern medical knowledge is desperately needed. These opportunities not only offer a route to helping others; they also present a special opportunity for travel.

Once you have a direction, you can begin searching out the right program for you. Ms. Rubin offers the following 10 tips. These are designed primarily for dealing with organizations you are not familiar with or programs for which you will have to travel.

■ **Ask each organization about its professional affiliations.** Is it part of a national network of similar organizations? Is it an offshoot of a medical center or university? Is it registered with the local business bureau or chamber of commerce? Is it affiliated with a government organization or the United Nations? Ms. Rubin says that this helps establish a comfort level with the organization. She explains that some people feel more comfortable volunteering for organizations that have strong local ties or national affiliations.

■ **Request a list of references.** Usually organizations are willing to provide the names and contact information of alumni who

can share their volunteer experiences with you. If there's any hesitancy, she says, that should be a red flag that something may be awry.

■ **Inquire about the length of the program.** Some last a year, some have one-month missions, and others may allow you to go for as little as one week.

■ **Check out the organization's level of support and accommodations.** You may be comfortable living in modest accommodations while others may require a higher level of staff support, prefer to stay in a hotel or guest house, or rent a home. Are you OK with sharing your room with six people whom you never met before?

■ **Find out about their emergency procedures.** Also look into safety aspects of the program. Is there someone local you can contact 24/7 in case of emergency? Is there a similar arrangement for your family and friends back home in case they need to reach you?

■ **Ask about travel insurance.** Not all programs provide it. Others require that you purchase it before traveling. If such insurance is provided, what does it cover? What are the exceptions?

■ **Determine what placements are available.** Some programs place volunteers with many different skills in one project, such as an orphanage. For example, a physician would deliver medical care to the children while someone else may repair the roof. Other programs focus only on medical care.

■ **Ask about its orientation program.** Is there one? Or is there any type of preparation required of you before you enter the country? Also, what type of orientation is given once you arrive?

■ **Check out language requirements.** Do you want to volunteer in a place where English is the main language, where everyone speaks a foreign language that you speak fluently, or where you don't understand the local language at all? Ms. Rubin says that volunteers are often surprised to learn that many programs don't require them to speak the local language.

■ **Inquire about the program fee.** Most programs charge anywhere from \$500 to \$4,000, depending on many factors like length of stay, region of the world you're visiting, and level of services or staff support. She says some organizations will provide everything, such as your visa, airfare, meals, language les-

sons, and cultural excursions. Others are set up with a lower budget; volunteers stay in someone's home or provide their own travel insurance.

Whether you're volunteering in the U.S. or a developing country, Ms. Rubin says it's essential to develop realistic expectations for what you can accomplish. For some doctors, she says this can be difficult because they're used to helping dozens of people each day. But when they travel to a new environment, they may not have the opportunity to apply all their skills, or they may be confronted by a language or cultural barrier that minimizes or limits their effectiveness.

Still, she's heard numerous stories of how individuals return from these experiences completely changed. They develop a new perspective on the world. Their efforts can have a ripple effect on the community they serve.

Ms. Rubin tells the story of one volunteer—a woman engineer—who visited a school in a remote village in India. During a question-and-answer session, one girl asked, “How can you be an engineer? I thought only men can be engineers.” The volunteer simply stated that many women in the U.S. are engineers.

Several years later, the same young girl happened to see the director of the volunteer program in her village. She told the director that she was now in school, learning to be an engineer, inspired by the volunteer who came to her school.

“That was five seconds of a [volunteer] experience,” Ms. Rubin says, adding that this same scenario could easily apply to other professions, including physicians. But those five seconds alone had a lifetime of impact on the young girl.

Better Now Than Later

If you're putting off volunteering for international medical missions until after retirement, you may want to push up your timeline. Overseas trips can be brutal. In addition to jet lag, you may be on your feet for 12 or 13 hours each day for a week, performing dozens of operations. You may also be expected to socialize with officials of the host country, like the governor and mayor, who may want to express their gratitude. Invariably, someone gets sick with diarrhea from drinking the local water or eating unfamiliar foods, adds Dr. Anthony Griffin, a plastic and

reconstructive surgeon at Beverly Hills Cosmetic Surgery Institute in Beverly Hills, Cal.

“This is hard enough as it is when you’re a young buck,” he says. “I can’t imagine doing this in my 70s. I have the energy now and make it a priority.”

Since 1995, Dr. Griffin has volunteered for approximately 10 missions in Kenya, Peru, and other countries where he operates mainly on children with cleft lips and palates and has sometimes performed burn-scar reconstruction for Operation Smile.

After his first operation in Kenya, which took only about 45 minutes, he says the patient’s physical transformation was so amazing that the parents barely recognized their own child. That’s when he got hooked and realized, “Wow, this is really making a difference.”

Dr. Griffin, who regularly works approximately 60 hours a week, books overseas missions well in advance, then lets everything else fall in place around them. As a result of prioritizing,

Cultural Exchange

If you’re thinking of volunteering in another country, Ms. Rubin recommends the book *How to Live Your Dream of Volunteering Overseas*, by Joseph Collins, Stefano DeZerega, and Zahara Heckscher (Penguin, 2001). It addresses many aspects of the experience, including reasons for volunteering, rewards and obstacles, action steps, and assessing your interests and special needs.

Some volunteers wind up in trouble because they don’t read up on the country they’re visiting or its cultural nuances.

“Familiarizing yourself as much as you can with the culture and country before you go is always going to be a huge help,” she says. “If you don’t speak the language, learn a few basic phrases. Appreciate the fact that you’re going to experience another culture as a visitor, as a peer or coworker. You want to be as respectful as you possibly can and as culturally sensitive as you possibly can.”

In Latin American countries, for instance, the relationships that you develop with the local people can be key to the success of your mission. Be patient and give them a chance to build slowly so you can develop trust, says Billy Vaughn, chief learning officer at Diversity Training University in San Francisco, Cal.

“Assume the best about people and their actions,” says Mr. Vaughn.

he says his practice has become more efficient. He has more time for vacations, to attend meetings or give lectures. Even his income has increased.

Physicians who volunteer closer to home also find there are professional and personal rewards to be reaped right now, as opposed to waiting until retirement years. Greg Buford, M.D., a plastic surgeon in Englewood, Colo., says engaging in volunteer activities has made him realize he has talent outside medicine. It also taught him how to fund-raise, coordinate large events, and interact with business leaders in a highly visible role. He feels his volunteer work has helped round out his skill set and his approach to life.

Dr. Buford volunteers for various charities, including the Denver Active 20-30 Children's Foundation, a nonprofit organization for business leaders 20 to 39 years old. Through his volunteer work, his interpersonal skills have improved. He says he has developed a better way of reading and relating to people from dif-

“Be very flexible and adapt to the environment you're in. Do not expect people to adapt to your style.”

Cultural differences can trigger many awkward situations. For example, he says, never compare a Latin American country with the U.S. A local person may think you are finding fault with their way of life. Although Americans consider constructive criticism to be healthy, that same opinion is not shared globally. Many people in developing countries become offended if you openly criticize their government.

Mr. Vaughn offers these examples:

People in Latin American countries usually require high contact or strong relationships before they allow you to do business with them. Your title does not automatically generate trust.

People in western countries tend to be more independent, more “I” focused, while those in Latin America, Asia, and Africa are more “we” focused. While it's okay to individually reward doctors in western nations for their achievements, that's not always the case in Asia or Africa. Play it safe. Applaud the entire healthcare team.

Latin Americans tend to be passionate about their views or perspectives. Don't be surprised if another doctor becomes emotional over a slight difference of opinion.

ferent professions and socio-economic backgrounds. He has also developed contacts in other industries, like banking and real estate, that he would never have formed on his own. Working with charities can also have a snowball effect. The more you work with them, the more contacts you make, the more your name is circulated among various organizations as a person who gets the job done. That kind of reputation opens doors, he says.

Working with charities can also have a snowball effect. The more you work with them, the more contacts you make, the more your name is circulated among various organizations as a person who gets the job done. That kind of reputation opens doors, Dr. Greg Buford says.

He feels that physicians often develop blinders if they don't venture outside the field of medicine. He urges doctors to dive into a volunteer experience head first and to not be afraid of failure, even if they may become

involved in activities they've never been previously exposed to or lack experience in handling. Doctors are quick learners, he points out, and volunteering forces them to draw upon skills that they didn't know they possessed. He points to his own crash course in charity auctions, where he learned about the various components of event planning.

"A lot of physicians don't have a lot of confidence outside their area of expertise," says Dr. Buford. "[Volunteering] allowed me to step out of my role as a physician and round myself as a person and learn what my strengths and weaknesses were," Dr. Buford says. "It builds you up professionally and personally. The stronger person you are, the better a physician you are, the better a doctor you are to your patients."

Firm Foundations

Some physicians become so involved in volunteer work that they start their own foundations to extend their reach. Back in 1991, Joseph Haddad, Jr., M.D., heard from a retired colleague how many children born in Honduras with either a cleft palate or cleft lip had limited access to medical care, including trained plastic surgeons. So he contacted the main teaching hospital in Tegucigalpa, the country's capital, and offered to teach local doctors new surgical techniques used in the U.S. The pair

worked with the University of Honduras and the Honduras Ministry of Health to create a three-year training program involving plastic surgery, cranial-facial surgery, and hand surgery.

“We didn’t want to just operate and leave,” says Dr. Haddad, now Director of Pediatric Otolaryngology/Head and Neck Surgery at New York-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City. “We wanted to make sure that the children were taken care of when we left—that [the doctors] weren’t just dependent on us, that they learned from us how to do the surgery.”

So in 1995, Dr. Haddad and his colleague started their own foundation, called the Honduran Medical Institute, which is supported mainly by private donations. Through the foundation, the doctors created a fully equipped operating room and pay the salaries of three dedicated nurses to ensure that their work continues.

Last year the foundation also purchased a special microscope for local physicians trained in microvascular surgery to perform limb reattachments, a purchase that attracted much deserved attention from the government and Ministry of Health, he says.

From a professional standpoint, the experience has offered many surgical challenges. He says there are more cranial-facial abnormalities since the clefts tend to be more severe. To make matters worse, the children also suffer from poor nutrition.

“You get to a certain point in your career where much of what you do is rather straightforward,” says Dr. Haddad. “But when you can help with more problematic cases and help families who are in dire need of this work, there’s a unique satisfaction associated with that...It’s helped me grow my clinical skills as a surgeon.”

It’s also expanded his skills in other areas. Since the government is primarily responsible for delivering medical care and paying physicians’ salaries in Honduras, practicing diplomacy becomes essential, especially after new politicians are elected to office. He says it has opened his eyes to the stark realities that exist in developing nations.

Another physician-founded volunteer organization is OmniMed (www.omnimed.org), a nonprofit founded in 1998 by Edward O’Neil, Jr., M.D., who practices emergency medicine at Caritas St. Elizabeth Medical Center in Boston. OmniMed promotes health volunteerism via established programs in four different countries: Kenya, Belize, Guyana, and Thailand. Each year, it sends approx-

imately 25 U.S. physicians to these countries for 10-day stints to help train local doctors. Most pay their own way.

“Seeing the world as it is, is an important thing for all of us,” says Dr. O’Neil, who has authored two books recently published by the American Medical Association: *A Practical Guide to Global Health Service* (2006) and *Awakening Hippocrates: A Primer on Health, Poverty, and Global Service* (2006). “That’s an unusual thing for many Americans. We have an insular history. But I couldn’t imagine not having this as a regular part of my life.”

He recalls one physician volunteer who stated that one day spent in Belize or Guyana is the equivalent of a month spent in the U.S. “Your senses are bombarded” with new experiences, such as dealing with a foreign culture, language, religion, politics, and impoverished conditions.

Although volunteering overseas isn’t for everyone, Dr. O’Neil believes that physicians who choose this route are in a great position to lead and direct change in health care, which can make an enormous difference in the world. He says 1,000 children under the age of five die every day in developing nations, and the difference in lifespan between people living in the richest countries and the poorest region in the world—sub-Saharan Africa—is 30 years.

“Volunteering speaks to the soul of the profession,” Dr. O’Neil says. “As a profession, we do share this ethical imperative. I think I’m a much better physician, more compassionate, and have a much better understanding of the big picture of what’s going on in the world because I’ve done this work.”

Another physician who has started his own foundation is Adan Rios, M.D., an oncologist affiliated with M.D. Andersen Cancer Center in Houston, Tex., and an expert in AIDS, HIV, and related disorders. With seed money from George Foreman, former heavyweight boxing champion of the world, he created a foundation in 1998 called the Adan A. Rios Foundation, which supports several goals in the rural communities of his native country, Panama. Initially, the mission focused on teaching people about the importance of nutrition. Now Dr. Rios travels several times a year with other doctors in various disciplines to Santiago, Panama, to deliver medical information to the local community.

The foundation sponsors a free annual medical conference, which is simultaneously translated from English to Spanish and transmitted live via radio and the Internet to rural areas of Panama. Approximately 500 physicians and other healthcare providers attend. The speakers (from the U.S.) address complex issues like AIDS but explain them in lay terms so that everyone can understand, says Dr. Rios.

He believes that some physicians volunteer because they have an awakening of sorts. In his case, he had the opportunity to receive an education and practice medicine for 20 years at “one of the world’s greatest medical centers” (M.D. Andersen). No matter how much of his success was due to hard work, self-motivation, and perhaps self-preservation, he says he realizes that many people helped him along the way, never expecting anything in return.

Volunteer Etiquette

No matter where you volunteer, follow these tips to help maximize your experience:

- **Look before you leap.** Make sure you understand what a volunteer opportunity requires of your schedule before you commit.
- **Check your ego at the door.** While physicians are highly educated people, it’s impossible to know everything. Trust that the organization you are volunteering for knows what it is doing and what it needs. Define your role from the outset to best serve you and the organization as well.
- **Expand your horizons.** Try something new! This is an opportunity to pursue an entirely different passion. New-found excitement can reinvigorate everything you do.
- **Ask for help.** If you don’t know how to do something, or are unsure of what’s expected of you as a volunteer, ask. Nonprofits want to make sure you know what to do and how to do it. Otherwise, it’s a waste of everyone’s time.
- **Don’t hold back.** Once you are committed to helping, give it your all. Your time is precious, so make sure you and the nonprofit you are volunteering for are getting everything you’ve got to give.

Source: Jason Willett, Director of Communications, VolunteerMatch (www.volunteermatch.org).

“When that moment of epiphany happens, most people will do whatever they can to return some of what has been given to them,” says Dr. Rios. “In that process, there’s a transformation, there’s growth, there’s a better understanding of who you are. The reward is seeing that you have done something for somebody else without expecting anything other than to see good happening.”

Starting Early

While many physicians turn to volunteer work as they grow older, another nonprofit sets the stage for volunteering early on, targeting students still in medical school. Child Family Health International (CFHI), www.cfhi.org, based in San Francisco, was founded by Dr. Evaleen Jones, a family physician and assistant clinical professor in the school of medicine at Stanford University in Menlo Park, Cal.

She started the organization in 1991, during her third year in medical school, and operated it out of her home. She believes medical schools fall short in providing students with a global health perspective. Her goal was to expand the classroom environment for medical students and improve health services in developing nations. Medical students and other health professionals who want to have an experience abroad pay roughly \$1,500 per placement to CFHI, which then donates the money to the communities it serves.

Dr. Jones says that medical education leans toward science instead of the human aspect of the profession. Her organization gives medical students “experiences that bring back a lot of humanity and humility, really ground students, and bring them back to why they’re in medicine. Instead of doing a lot of tests and running around working with a lot of numbers, they really connect with patients. They’re much more aware of the lack of resources in other countries and the wastefulness in this country. We need to learn about that if we want to create a healthy world.”

Students pay their own way and go on missions for four to six weeks in Ecuador, Bolivia, Mexico, India, and South Africa. Since they’re still learning medicine, they do not treat patients themselves. Instead, they observe the problems that doctors face in other countries and conduct what she refers to as “strength

assessments” to determine what the communities need. Then the students figure out how to make things happen through their contacts and resources back home.

Even small gifts of time and effort can make a world of difference, says Dr. Jones. One medical student, for instance, spent a week overseas in a small village that didn’t have any drinking water. When she returned home, she persuaded her father to take several members of his civic organization to that village to drill for a well. Another female student worked with the local police department in Mexico to create a domestic violence prevention program for women, including an education program for men.

CFHI has recently added another project to its to-do list: recovering unused medical supplies from individuals and organizations in the U.S. So far, the organization has recovered \$5.8 million worth of medical supplies and has re-distributed them to areas of need.

The organization has recently added another project to its to-do list: recovering unused medical supplies from individuals and organizations in the U.S. So far, the organization has recovered \$5.8 million worth of medical supplies and has started redistributing them to needy clinics both here and abroad. (A portion of the supplies collected so far were used for victims of Hurricane Katrina along the Gulf Coast.)

Meanwhile, Dr. Jones hopes CFHI will become the gold standard for volunteerism: “It isn’t a top-down, north-south, vertical approach,” she explains. “It’s a collaborative project where the community identifies the needs, the projects are sustainable, and the money that’s generated from [volunteers] interested in going abroad is making an impact in these communities.”

Any way you look at it, volunteering creates opportunities in all directions for both those who give and those who receive. In the end, it’s up to you to decide where you want to go and what kind of footprint you wish to leave behind.