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Nurses on a mission

Cover Story

By Shari Held For Custom Publications

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Las Vegas? Paris? Hawaii? Those are all hot destinations Americans often choose to travel to for vacation.

But what about Kenya, Haiti or the Philippines? Many nurses choose to spend their hard-earned vacation time caring for others in third-world countries, sometimes in the aftermath of disaster.

Here are the experiences of four nurses who regularly opt for mission trips over leisure travel, the reasons they do it and how their efforts make a difference to people in need around the globe.

Intense and rewarding

Jackie Brumley, RN, recently returned from her third mission trip to Chambrun, Haiti, just outside Port-au-Prince. The island nation still was reeling from the January earthquake that measured 7.0 on the Richter scale. Brumley saw “huge buildings reduced to pebbles,” women and children in food lines that stretched for miles and people in panic because they



abuse

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had no food or water.

“We saw 5,000 patients in the one week that I was there in February,” said Brumley, who became involved with missions to Haiti through a nonprofit group called Nehemiah Vision Ministries. “Many had basic complaints that could be treated with Tylenol or Ibuprofen. They hug us in appreciation for whatever it is that we are able to provide them.”

Brumley said she feels blessed just to be a nurse. She was 38 when she returned to school to get her nursing degree and ended up graduating with honors.

“I decided I shouldn’t let my dream of being a nurse go unfulfilled just because I thought I wasn’t smart enough,” said Brumley, who will begin work on her master’s degree this fall. “Since I was older, it was more difficult, but I was also more dedicated than I would have been when I was younger.

“Traveling to Haiti has allowed me to use my gifts to help those who don’t have decent -- if any -- health care available to them. That’s why I keep coming back.”

While she typically serves as a triage nurse, Brumley said it’s important to be flexible and do whatever is needed. One memorable day, she and another nurse assisted Haitian women at the house where the mission group was staying.

“Washing clothes by hand was exhausting and physically draining,” she said. “Our hands were bloody, yet I’m thankful that I got to experience this.”

Brumley is returning to Haiti for her fourth time this month. She’ll be leading a group of 25 people, which includes her



Judy Clanin collects unused medical supplies for her clinic in Nairobi, Kenya. - PHOTO: Marc Lebryk

RELATED INFORMATION

The nurses:

Judy Clanin, RN

Specialty: Clinical systems analyst

Facility: Riverview Hospital

Hometown: Anderson

Mission trips: 15+

Latest mission trips: Kenya and Haiti

Quote: “You find you can really do a lot with very little when you take your training, knowledge, common sense and a spirit of faith with you.”

Jackie Brumley, RN

Specialty: Nursing

Facility: Indianapolis VAMedical Center

Hometown: Fishers

Mission trips: 5

Latest mission trip: Haiti

Quote: “How can you not be moved emotionally when someone cries after you hand them a granola bar?”

Amy Jacobs, RN

Specialty: Intensive care

Facility: St. Joseph Hospital

Hometown: Cicero

Mission trips: 14

Latest mission trip: Mexico

Quote: “If you’re interested, just try it once. There are short weekend trips available, and trips here in the U.S. There are so many ways to help.”

husband and son.

“There is a need for everyone and anyone willing to serve,” she said.

Doing God’s work

In 1988 a friend persuaded Judy Clanin, RN, to join a mission team traveling to Jamaica. Since then, she’s served every year and has traveled to Chile, Panama, Honduras, China, Haiti and Kenya.

Clanin has a small clinic in the Fuato Nyayo slum in Nairobi, Kenya. It’s named Clanin Clinic in honor of her parents. Each year Clanin opens the clinic to the children, teachers and church members in the compound as well as to the slum dwellers.

“We experience heartbreaking, complicated medical conditions -- everything from simple rashes, coughs and colds to parasite infections, HIV and horrible disfiguring wounds -- but every year God gives us a wonderful miracle,” she said. “Other than the devastating losses seen in Haiti, Kenya poverty and living conditions are a heartbreaking reality that keep me going back to make a difference, if only to one life at a time. The smiles are better than a paycheck.”

Clanin, who chairs the mission committee for Wesley Free Methodist Church in Anderson, Ind., typically travels with a team of primarily Christians.

“We always partner with a church ... as we believe that short-term missions cannot make long-term changes in lives unless they have a presence after the team goes back home,” she said.

Although she realizes not everyone is called to do mission work abroad, she advises those who are nudged to not “ignore the niggles.” Mission work allows Clanin to use her nursing skills, and she said she grows from the experience.

“I keep going back because I realize the work will never be done,” she said. “There is great need.”

A way of life

When Amy Jacobs, RN, was growing up, spring break was synonymous with mission trips. She went on her first one when she was only 8.

Kathleen Muller, RN

Specialty: Case management

Facility: Saint John’s Hospital

Hometown: Anderson

Mission trips: 2

Latest mission trip: Philippines

Quote: “I would encourage anyone to pray about going on a mission trip. Then, let your heart lead you.”

Today, Jacobs has participated in 14 mission trips sponsored by the Cicero Seventh Day Adventist Church. She even coordinated the last two to El Higo in Mexico.

“I started so young, it’s in my blood now,” she said. “I’m very grateful I went when I was so young because it impacted how I see other cultures and how I now view service.”

On her latest trip, she worked with three nurses and a doctor to triage and treat patients at a clinic. She also provided health education.

“Doing medical clinics is so much fun,” she said. “You get to know the people even though there is a language barrier.”

Her most memorable experience from her latest trip was helping a woman who suffered from headaches. As it turns out, the patient’s blood pressure was in the 230s. Jacobs was able to give her medication until she could visit her doctor.

“This one really impacted me,” she said. “I knew she needed help right then to hopefully prevent a stroke, and we were able to give her that help.”

Jacobs has traveled to Mexico, Central America, Africa and India and has had her eyes opened to how much Americans have.

“I return to work more refreshed after a mission trip,” she said. “It’s a different type of nursing work that I do there, and it really makes me connect with why I want to be a nurse.”

Building lifelong relationships

Sometimes people are called to mission work by a serendipitous route. Kathleen Muller’s 2008 vacation to Mexico fell through, so she and her husband joined a mission trip to the Philippines. It was the beginning of a tradition. They returned from their second trip this February.

“We are drawn back there by the dear, tender, warm people of the Philippines,” Muller, RN, said. “They have so little, but they have so much to give.”

The focus of both trips was to provide vacation Bible school -- singing, skits, playing games and Bible reading -- to the

children of Iloilo, a primitive area on the southeast portion of Panay Island. On this trip, 200 street children were expected to participate, but 500 showed up. Muller said they were overwhelmed, but everything worked out. The group also helped build a pigpen and provided the local church with five pigs.

Muller's most memorable experience occurred on the outskirts of Iloilo at a dump where people live in shanties on a mound of refuse. There's no electricity, no running water and the water they do have is contaminated.

"It humbles me to think there are people on the other side of the world who are living in squalor," she said. "I feel so blessed with my life when I see theirs, yet, these people smile, sing and praise the Lord for what they have."

Muller also has built lasting relationships from her mission trips, and she and her husband sponsor Nomal, a Filipino from Lambunao, a municipality of Iloilo, so he can attend Bible school in Dallas, Texas.

"When we met him two years ago, never did I dream that this young man would be sitting in my living room here in Anderson, Ind.," she said. "It's an awesome experience hosting him after he and his family hosted us." ●

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