

A Year in the Life of a Volunteer

by Dr. Joyce Cuff

We at Thiel often talk about the value of capstone experiences for our students that call upon them to apply their knowledge in meaningful ways in service to others. In this sense, my 13 months in Karatu, Tanzania, clearly qualifies as a capstone sabbatical. The medical facility where I worked opened just three years ago as the first step in the realization of a dream of Dr. Frank Artress and his wife, Susan Gustafson, to bring together the broad-based experience and expertise of Tanzanian medical personnel and the more highly specialized and technology-supported

expertise of health care practitioners from western countries. FAME (Foundation for African Medicine and Education) was born out of that dream. The FAME medical dispensary serves the area around Karatu, a large village and stop-over point for many safari companies, and is now complemented by a FAME mobile unit that travels to a rural children's village and surrounding community and a more scattered population living "in the bush." To access this remote population, every month the mobile unit, packed with supplies and medical personnel, travels four to five hours on dirt roads that are often no more than paths or dry river or lake beds. Once on site, the clinic serves about 300 patients over three days.

While I was at FAME, a free-standing clinical laboratory was completed and a 36-bed hospital is due to open sometime in the coming year. I had the opportunity to help to design and oversee construction of the clinical lab facility, to assist the laboratory staff in improving the accuracy and consistency of their testing, and to expand the spectrum of tests being done in the lab and on mobile outings. There were countless opportunities to collaborate with Dr. Frank about individual patients, interpretation of specific tests, courses of treatment and additional approaches to laboratory testing under enormous logistical and economic constraints.

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Top: The mobile van is always a welcome sight. Local residents wave at the van as it drives past. Above: Dr. Cuff laughs with another happy patient.

The work itself, both in the dispensary and on the mobile clinics, was emotionally challenging but richly rewarding. People who had never received any medical attention other than that provided by their traditional healers would sometimes travel great distances often across a fairly barren landscape to reach us. Although often

surprised and occasionally horrified that we would want a sample of their blood, urine or stool, the patients were incredibly compliant. Fortunately, their compliance usually paid off well and sometimes the interventions were life saving. A baby strapped to the back of a man bicycling to the mobile clinic site as we were driving back to Karatu was diagnosed and treated for malaria on the dirt path we were following; a tuberculosis patient walked for two days to get to the mobile clinic and then was transported by FAME staff to the nearest TB hospital; a young child was so dehydrated from an infection that she was in a coma when her parents brought her in and was up and walking by the end of a day of IV fluids, oral rehydration therapy and antibiotics; at the dispensary a child was monitored and kept alive long enough for FAME to arrange for heart surgery to be performed in Germany. That young girl is now happy and healthy and attending school for the first time. These are just a few examples of the impact of FAME, the organization with which I had the joy of working during my capstone sabbatical.