



Dr. Deborah Stymiest

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The Inspiration to Volunteer

With the new year upon us and resolutions still top of mind, I would like to share with you one special commitment that I have made for 2009. In February, I will be travelling to Honduras as part of a volunteer health care team that will provide medical and dental care to the local population. Volunteering my services in a developing country is something that I have always wanted to do, and after 25 years of practising dentistry, I now feel confident enough to follow through on this goal.

What inspired me to go on this mission? Last spring, a first-year university student approached me with a proposal. The student had formed a local chapter of Global Medical Brigades (GMB) at her university. GMB describes itself as a secular, international network of university clubs and volunteer organizations that provide communities in developing nations with sustainable health care solutions.

When asked if I might be interested in joining an upcoming GMB mission, I thanked the student and explained that having just started my term as CDA president, I felt I would be too busy in the next 12 months for such an endeavour. Not wanting to rule it out completely, I asked her to keep me informed about the project's progress.

Later in the year, I received an email with details about the local GMB chapter's new website and its first planning and recruitment meeting. Over 70 students attended this meeting, and through a fair and considerate process, 30 were selected for this year's mission while the others were placed on a list for the 2010 brigade.

By mid-fall, the student reported that a team of doctors, dentists and nurses had been formed. Health care professionals from Canada, Colorado and Jamaica were eager to join the team travelling to Honduras. I was impressed as I read more about the team member's various specialties and

level of expertise and especially that a colleague from British Columbia, Dr. Awdesh Chandra, would be a dentist on the brigade.

There was still the outstanding issue of securing medical and dental supplies. Through written correspondence, phone calls and persistence, the group of students successfully acquired some \$30,000 in supplies from one of Canada's largest drug companies. This includes 3 dental kits and 6 medical kits — enough to provide ethical and effective treatment for hundreds of Honduran citizens.

So, when my phone rang again in November and that same university student asked, “Now will you come, Mom?”, I just had to say yes. That's right, my daughter Laura, co-president of GMB at Mount Allison University, is my inspiration to volunteer. She is part of the current generation of students making a difference in the world; young people with such strong convictions and drive that they are simply unstoppable.

While I am looking forward to providing preventive and urgent dental care to the Honduran villagers, I fully expect to witness first-hand the devastating effect of poverty on dental health. Many colleagues have shared their experiences about international volunteering and have offered advice to help me prepare for the journey. I am sure that like those who have gone before me, I will be deeply affected by the experience.

I admit to having moments of self-doubt, wondering what contribution one dentist can possibly make. After seeing the organizational work performed by the GMB students, and sharing in their enthusiasm and exuberance, I have come to believe that the acts of individuals truly do matter, and that one by one, we can make a difference.

I hope that sharing my own inspiration to volunteer might encourage you to also consider volunteering, in whatever form, and perhaps instill a sense of hope and confidence in the young people who will form the dental profession of the future. I conclude with a promise to report back on the mission and leave you with some words from Mother Teresa that have provided me with added inspiration: “We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.”

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