

A Global Coalition of Good



An Eritrean mother waits anxiously as PFP volunteer Dr. Mark Helbraun (center), a colorectal surgeon from Closter, N.J., works with an Eritrean doctor to treat the woman's young daughter.

Stephen M. Katz / Physicians for Peace

As our world has become an interconnected village, community service has gone global as well. More and more Americans are ambassadors of goodwill, no longer content to let Washington alone define our nation's links to the world. Every day I learn about another inspiring and ingenious effort by Americans to make connections, share some know-how and improve the world.

Geoffrey Tabin, an accomplished American ophthalmologist, sent me an e-mail recently reporting on the week he spent in a poor village in Ghana, in West Africa. «We examined 4,600 people and documented their visual status, refractive errors and any pathology or disease,» he wrote. «We gave spectacles to all who needed glasses and gave away 500 pairs of reading glasses. My retinal partner and I performed 159 cataract surgeries. All of the patients were seen one week postoperatively. There were no infections or serious complications.»

Dr. Tabin and his colleagues honed their techniques working in Himalayan communities in Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan and other parts of the region. Each cataract operation costs only \$15, and the ready-made eye-glasses that he provides, premade for a village-wide range of strengths, are \$3. In the skilled hands of Tabin and his team, the eyesight of a village is restored in days at a tiny cost per person.

Physicians for Peace, another group of remarkable volunteers, mobilizes teams of doctors, nurses and other health professionals to provide medical training, services and supplies for impoverished communities in all parts of the world. It defines its mission not only as offering medical assistance but also as building peace through health.

Artists too can pursue that mission. One of the world's greatest, New York City Ballet's former principal dancer Jacques d'Amboise, brings the U.S. to the world and the world to the U.S. by joining kids in the joy of music and dance. D'Amboise has long contributed to children in the U.S. through the National Dance Institute (NDI), which brings the enchantments of dance to public-school kids, often in tough neighborhoods. This year NDI featured Potou, a Senegalese village, in its yearlong program. Thousands of New York City schoolkids studied and talked about African villages like Potou; they danced and raised funds to help them. Thanks to their efforts, Potou's villagers will have better health care, a bigger food harvest and midday school meals.

Geekcorps is, well, just what it says. Its Internet-age volunteers bridge the digital divide one network at a time in the villages of the low-income world. They train people in information and communications technologies and advise them on starting businesses

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using these new skills. Working in Timbuktu and beyond, Geekcorps relies on its «Desert PC,» specially designed for the low electricity access and high temperatures and dust of the Sahara.

From the most local civic groups to the largest businesses, we all want to make a difference. General Electric, for example, donates large amounts of hospital equipment. Becton, Dickinson does the same with syringes and diagnostics. Novartis, GlaxoSmithKline, Merck, Pfizer, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Abbott Laboratories and others have launched major drug programs, backed by considerable staff efforts, to battle devastating diseases like malaria, HIV/AIDS, trachoma, leprosy, lymphatic filariasis and more.

These and other companies are discovering the powerful added benefits of reaching out to the poor beyond the obvious direct ones: better morale among workers and customers; a boost in campus recruiting; a chance to identify and understand new markets and opportunities. The result is an outpouring of corporate-based community service: donations of time, often in the form of forgone vacations, and of company technology and know-how, which enable the poorest of the poor to improve their productivity and break free of poverty.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown recently said at the U.N. that «to address the worst of poverty, we urgently need to summon up the best efforts of humanity.» He called for «the greatest coalition of conscience in pursuit of the greatest of causes.» Fourteen world leaders, including President Bush, and 20 major companies joined his call that day. Americans from all parts of our society already have their shoulders to the great global effort to end extreme poverty, and multitudes more are ready to join.