Keeping the Kenya promise

By fulfilling his childhood pledge to provide health care to rural Kenya, an OU-COM alum also is giving students international clinical experience

by Anita Martin

Long before she knew she wanted to be a doctor, Sara Snyder played safari with her father in the family’s Toronto, Ohio, living room and dreamed about the wild, majestic landscapes of Africa.

Last December, she got to experience the real thing. Snyder, then a fourth-year medical student at the Ohio University College of Osteopathic Medicine (OU-COM), was one of 31 volunteers who participated in the tenth anniversary SHARE Kenya-Ohio trip from Nov. 21 to Dec. 19, 2005. Four senior medical students from OU-COM participated, including Snyder, Brian Steinmetz, Kimberly Sudheimer and Rhea Richardson, Deborah Meyer, Ph.D., who served as the group’s administrative director, and founder and host B. S. Bonyo, D.O. (’98).

SHARE (Student Health Assistance Rural Experience) Kenya-Ohio provides volunteer health care to Kenyans as well as clinical and cultural training to Americans. Participants set up and run provisional clinics in areas around the northwest village of Kisumu, receiving a warm welcome every time.

“In November, the people are looking out for SHARE Kenya,” Bonyo says. “For most of (the patients), these are the only doctors they will see in their lives.” With an average annual income of less than $100, many people in this area cannot afford the limited health care provided locally by private and provincial clinics.

Bonyo vowed to somehow improve the health conditions of his community after his sister died of dehydration at age nine in their village of Wangaya more than 30 years ago.
“She died from a very preventable disease and from a lack of access to health care,” Bonyo recalls. “We can’t solve all the health-care problems in Kenya. We are just trying to help, to make a difference and to learn. Hopefully our work will have a ripple effect.”

**Project: provide**

To keep his promise, Bonyo attended a Catholic boarding school in Kenya and applied to American universities, eventually receiving a scholarship to a community college in Texas. To raise the $800 for airfare, Bonyo traveled door to door on a bicycle for several months collecting small donations.

Bonyo went on to the University of Texas-Arlington and to Ohio University, where, as a first-year medical student in 1995, he led a group of OU-COM volunteers to Kenya. The program gained official university sponsorship in 1997. “There were a lot of willing people at Ohio University,” Bonyo says. “It was easier than I thought (to develop the program).”

Ten years later, the annual program includes fourth-year medical students, residents and clinicians, along with Ohio Northern pharmacy students and pharmacists, and medical volunteers from the University of North Texas Health Science Center, Des Moines University, Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine, the University of North Carolina and Ohio State University.

Medical students, residents and clinicians saw more than 4,000 patients, at an average of 300 patients a day. Their next goal: to complete the construction of a permanent SHARE Kenya-Ohio clinic in the village of Masara and provide volunteer health care all year round.

**Lions and tigers and tropical disease**

Before leaving for Kenya, Snyder’s childhood dreams of Africa grew precariously real. “I was extremely nervous,” says Snyder, a self-proclaimed medical hypochondriac. “I was like: I’m going to get TB. I’m going to get AIDS. I’m going to get malaria. I was even nervous about the flight because I had never been on a plane before.”

Once in Kisumu, Snyder found herself adjusting to a rigorous schedule. After an early breakfast, participants would cram into hot, stuffy pickup trucks and travel one to two hours on bumpy, dusty dirt roads to construct their own clinics from scratch. Each student, supervised by an attending physician, typically saw about 25 patients a day – far more than they would see as medical residents in the States.

But for all four OU-COM students, the biggest challenge was recognizing and treating tropical diseases.
“We learn bits and pieces about tropical disease (in medical school), but most students never really pay attention,” says Sudheimer. “In the States you’re like: yeah right, malaria. But there malaria is like the flu is here.”

SHARE participants reviewed their knowledge of tropical medicine through supplemental reading and exchanged morning mini-lectures in Kenya.

Nearly every patient in Kenya has a condition that students would not see in the United States, including parasites, malnutrition and rare cancers. Adding to the challenge was the students’ reliance on volunteer translators and the lack of lab tests, x-rays and other diagnostic tools.

Students say they were often unsure of themselves as they consulted attending physicians at first, but grew more confident as the month progressed.

“The situation forced us to have confidence in what we learned,” says Steinmetz. “As a medical student, you’re not trained to trust yourself yet.”

Snyder admits to volunteering for wound care a couple times as a break from diagnostic stress, but she affirms that her medical examination skills have markedly improved.

“There really are some cases where you would see those conditions here, too,” Snyder adds. She treated a patient with sarcoidosis in the United States just weeks after encountering the inflammatory disease in Kenya. “They say: if it sounds like a horse and looks like a horse, it’s probably a horse. But you always have to be ready for a zebra.”

**Connecting lives**

Through all the heat and hard work, SHARE Kenya-Ohio volunteers found time to relax and connect with each other and with the culture around them.

“This trip is really one that immerses you in tropical medicine and patient care,” Steinmetz says, “But also, we got to experience Kenya in a lot of different ways.”

Volunteers took day trips to the Kakamega rainforest and to Masara, a village where Bonyo lived. They ended the trip with a three-day safari.

From Bonyo’s point of view, “the best part about the program for the students is that they can experience another culture and understand how much they have in the United States.”

**Journal Entry: Monday, Nov. 28**

Niche: Cool  Diche maber: Good job

It’s our second day of clinic. When we arrived ... nearly 30 children were waiting to greet us. Today was full of wounds, and I even got to pull a tooth. The day was a blessing overall. I’m looking forward to tomorrow.
Indeed, despite her childhood safari dreams, Snyder says the people of Kenya impressed her more than the natural setting.

“It was actually sad to come back home,” Snyder says. “The people there were so friendly, and they seemed so much happier with so much less. It makes you humble.”

**Sustained service**

As departure time neared, Snyder wasn’t the only one sad to go. And many have already expressed interest in participating in SHARE Kenya-Ohio in the future.

“You always felt like you could do more,” Steinmetz says. “Having a permanent clinic will help ease the guilt of leaving. They’ll have a year-round staff.”

Bonyo says the permanent clinic will launch as soon as they have the money needed to complete construction, a sum Bonyo estimates to be about $20,000. He hopes the clinic can open in November 2006.

“The plan is to use our own clinic as the central place to provide care all year round,” Bonyo says. He hopes to collaborate with government sources and non-government organizations like the Peace Corps, who are typically stationed in one area for at least two years.

With a permanent clinic, SHARE Kenya-Ohio can create laboratories for more accurate and cost-effective diagnostic tests. Also, eliminating the need to travel every day will free up time and resources for helping more people.

“That’s the most important part,” Sudheimer says, “to feel like I’m really making an impact on someone. In the States you don’t see it, but over there, you make such an immediate difference.”

*Editor’s note: This story originally appeared in Ohio University’s Outlook Online in April 2006.*

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**Journal Entry: Friday, Dec. 9**

Today, in the clinic was the first time I got to immediately see joy in someone’s eyes because of what I did. While I was seeing that patient, I didn’t even know a young woman was giving birth in another part of the room.

After clinic, we had the annual SHARE banquet with our translators and local helpers. One translator sang and another made a speech to thank us all for coming to help their country. She said we would never understand what a difference we had made in these people’s lives.

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**Permanent clinic opens**

“It is truly an amazing experience working in the clinic that Dr. Bonyo has spent the past 11 years building,” wrote Cheri Sheets. “The dedication ceremony was yesterday, and it was a really humbling experience. Public officials spoke of their pride in Dr. Bonyo for keeping his promise to bring health care to his people. I am so glad we were there to help him dedicate the clinic.

“The Kenyan people are so warm and welcoming. It is such a delight to be a part of the SHARE Kenya-Ohio experience.”

Sheets is an administrative assistant in the Department of Social Medicine and one of the 24 SHARE Kenya-Ohio volunteers who helped B. S. Bonyo, D.O. (’98), open the permanent, year-round Mama Pilista Memorial Clinic in Masara, Kenya, in December 2006. This excerpt is from a series of e-mail messages that chronicled her experience.

SHARE Kenya-Ohio is open for participation to residents of any level, fourth-year medical students and advanced nursing and physical therapy students as well as licensed physicians, nurses, pharmacists and therapists. Journalists and/or photographers are also welcome to participate.

Learn more about this program at [www.oucom.ohiou.edu/international/SHAREKenya/index.htm](http://www.oucom.ohiou.edu/international/SHAREKenya/index.htm).

If you are interested in participating in this year’s experience, contact Cheri Sheets at 740.593.4694 for an application. Applications will be accepted through mid-spring for the 2007 trip to Kenya.