

EVERYDAY

Miracles



THE ST. OLAF PERUVIAN MEDICAL EXPERIENCE
PARTNERS ST. OLAF STUDENTS WITH PROFESSORS
AND TOP ALUMNI MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS, WITH A
GOAL OF CHANGING LIVES ON TWO CONTINENTS.

By Carl Schroeder '05

Photographs provided by Ted Johnson, Aaron Broman '06 and Kelsey Holec '06

WALKING THROUGH A CROWDED HALLWAY at Hogar Clínica San Juan de Dios in Cusco, Peru, Kierre Nelson '06 noticed a small deformity on the upper lip of a Peruvian baby. A chemistry major, Nelson was one of a dozen St. Olaf students participating in the first Peruvian Medical

Experience, a new study-service Interim program developed by Professor of Biology and Director of Biomedical Studies Ted Johnson and Twin Cities pediatrician Doug Tate '70.

It was Nelson's first day at the clinic. Her assignment was to calm a rowdy group of children in a hallway when she noticed 9-month-old Ruth, who had a slight notch on her upper lip. Nelson realized Ruth might be a candidate for cleft-repair surgery through Children's Surgery International (CSI) and alerted Tate.

While Tate performed an examination, a social worker — the baby's guardian — explained through an interpreter that Ruth's mother had abandoned the child in a Dumpster three days after giving birth. Already raising 10 children on her own, the mother reasoned that Ruth's deformity would limit her chances for a normal life. The guardian consented to treatment, and four days later the child's cleft lip was repaired in a brief operation, the first of 108 surgeries performed by CSI's team of volunteer physicians during the trip.

"Something that's going to change Ruth's life took half an hour," says Nelson, who observed the surgery, supervised Ruth during post-operative care and spent much of the day simply holding the child. A year later, as she begins her post-graduate studies at the University of Minnesota's Duluth campus, Nelson says the experience strengthened her faith and solidified her decision to go to medical school. "The baby was in the right place at the right time, and so was I," says Nelson. "I think that was something bigger than just luck."

The Peruvian Medical Experience partners St. Olaf students with CSI, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit organization that offers free reconstructive surgery and treatment to third-world children. Students work with international physicians and pediatric patients and develop an awareness of global healthcare.

"One of the questions we always have to ask ourselves is, 'Am I making a difference?'" says Johnson. He and Tate have explored this question with two groups of St. Olaf students on multi-week immersions into medicine and culture in the mountainous country on South America's Pacific coast.

The Peruvian Medical Experience is an outgrowth of Tate's volunteer work with CSI, an independent Minnesota offshoot of a similar national organization, Operation Smile. After sharing firsthand accounts of the group's missions at a St. Olaf medical alumni panel in 2004, Tate connected with Johnson and the two began brainstorming ways to involve current students who are majoring in the natural and social sciences.

In June 2005, with partial funding from the college's Lilly Program, Johnson, Tate and a dozen students arrived in the southeastern Peruvian city of Cusco, where the students helped Tate screen children for medical needs at area hospitals and orphanages. The group then traveled to Arequipa, near the country's southern tip, where they assisted a CSI team of 30 surgeons, pediatricians, nurses and technicians providing surgery and post-operative care to more than 100 Peruvians, primarily children under age 12.

"Medicine is more than just the treatment or cure. It's all about the people, their unique life experiences and the relationships built between patients and care providers," says Katherine Harris '06, who participated in the 2006 Interim group at left.

CSI's most high-profile work involves the surgical repair of gaps, or clefts, of the lip and upper mouth. In the United States, these birth defects usually are fixed quickly, but in developing nations, surgery on a cleft lip or palate is often a luxury, leaving many afflicted children illness-prone and socially rejected. Other operations involve the repair of urological birth defects, with general health screening offered as time allows. "St. Olaf students have been a valuable resource to CSI," says CSI Chairman Mike Fairbourne, a meteorologist for the Twin

thought his family needed, putting his family well before himself." For Stephanie Smith '06, one of three nursing majors who participated in the 2006 trip, these non-medical service experiences taught her lessons she'll never forget. "In today's society, where everything is scientifically based, we see patients become a diagnosis," says Smith. "When we combine science with service, we bring a lot more humanity to our work." This coming January, Tate and Professor of Biology Dave Van Wylen '80

concentrations in biomedical studies and women's studies, and who intends to become a nurse practitioner. "There is much more to medicine than just the treatment or cure. It's all about the people, their unique life experiences and the relationships built between patients and care providers." After meeting the CSI medical team in Arequipa, Harris and other students put their Spanish-language skills to use. Kristen Aggerbeck '05, now working on a master's degree in public health at the University of

Nearly 5 percent of each St. Olaf graduating class goes on to medical school, and Professor of Biology Ted Johnson (center) makes sure that students receive a broad exposure to the field of medicine and he approaches it from a global perspective. "Working in isolation in one culture doesn't exist any more," says Johnson. For biology major Aaron Broman '06 (top left) and nursing major Christina Dokmo '06 (bottom left), the Peruvian medical experience has taught them invaluable lessons they'll use in the future as medical professionals.

"I was raised to believe that the best way to express your love is to give to others."

— TED JOHNSON, PROFESSOR OF BIOLOGY AND DIRECTOR OF BIOMEDICAL STUDIES

Cities CBS affiliate WCCO-TV. "When we go on a mission, our time is spent in the hospital doing the work. The students are able to go out into the community." In January 2006, Johnson and Tate returned to Cusco with 12 more St. Olaf students and Northfield dentist Jerry Appeldoorn '67. In addition to visiting clinics, conducting health screenings and interacting with homeless children, the group visited the dry western city of Chiclayo, where they assessed the region's potential for a future CSI mission. With no CSI physicians in Peru during this trip, students assisted Tate and Appeldoorn in general health and dental screenings and spent more time with local Peruvians. Biology major Aaron Broman '06 was struck by the priorities of the school-age boy he took grocery shopping at the local market. "He went for things he

will bring a third group of students to Peru and continue the collaborative medical outreach. Johnson sees the program as a natural extension of two St. Olaf ideals: incorporating a global perspective and encouraging service. "I was raised to believe that the best way to express your love is to give to others," he says. "If we believe in our mission as a college, then service should be part of who we are."

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

One of dozens of International and Off-Campus Studies programs offered by St. Olaf, the Peruvian Medical Experience stands out due to the hands-on medical experiences offered to students as well as its level of service and alumni involvement. In addition to Tate and Appeldoorn, several other St. Olaf alumni have inquired about future participation. Prior to both trips, students took a semester-long course from Johnson focusing on global health issues and Peru's history and customs. "By the time we got to Peru we already knew all about what we'd be seeing and dealing with, so we could delve in right away," says 2005 trip participant Katherine Harris '06, who majored in Spanish with

"Peruvian children spend their days on the streets peddling postcards, finger puppets and paintings and shining shoes to help support their families and, hopefully, pay for their education," says Kelsey Holec '06 (left).

Arizona, spent much of her time in operating rooms translating as American physicians trained Peruvian doctors and residents. "The local doctors now have some of the skills they need to do the surgeries themselves," says Aggerbeck. One Peruvian woman who had worn a scarf over her deformed lip for most of her life made a particular impression on the students. Aggerbeck says she will always remember visiting the young woman's hospital room the morning after surgery and seeing the scarf draped over a bedpost.

GENERATIONAL BONDS

For Doug Tate, who has traveled to Peru a half-dozen times (with CSI and on the two St. Olaf Interims), medical outreach has become a family affair. "Going on medical missions really changes your perspective," says Tate, who majored in biology and health studies at St. Olaf a generation ago. "To share that experience with my son and other students is really important." During the 2006 trip, Tate also became godfather to a Peruvian boy whose education he is now supporting. Chris Tate '06, who majored in biology with a biomedical studies concentration, participated in the summer 2005 program and enjoyed collaborating with his father. "It was fun working at the same level as he was, contributing in different yet similar ways," he says. As the younger Tate prepares to enter a master's program in public health at the University of Minnesota, he says the Peruvian Medical Experience

affected his worldview. "Some Peruvians are lucky if they get a piece of bread and something to drink a day," he says. "Coming back home, I realized that no matter what hard times I might be experiencing, it's nothing compared with what these people are going through every day."

From the water bottle that Kelsey Holec '06 and Kelsey Watt '07 used as a soccer ball in a Cusco street game to the incubators built from tinfoil, light bulbs and blankets at the Chiclayo regional hospital's neonatal unit, St. Olaf students learned that in Peru, you learn to make do.

"Seeing Peruvian physicians struggle to take care of their patients in overcrowded conditions made me appreciate how much medicine can be done with so little," says Holec, who majored in biology with a concentration in biomedical studies. "I entered hospital wards that looked like psych wards from 1950s black-and-white movies. The beds and cribs were rusting metal, the walls were a faded tan, and the paint on the floor, ceiling and walls was peeling off. Despite these deplorable surroundings, we found smiling physicians who truly cared for their patients. It wasn't just a job."

Leaving the country was hard for many students, knowing they had only scratched the surface of Peru's medical and economic needs. "I think our students are committed forever to Peru," says Johnson. "I would not be surprised if they end up down there again sometime."

St. Olaf students and alumni have helped transform lives through commitment, compassion and a willingness to learn from the world's impoverished.

In the end, Johnson says, the program's success can be measured in simple terms. "If a child is smiling when we leave," he says, "we've done good."

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