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A Commitment to Service

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A commitment to service



Ashlee Weimar '04 talks with villagers during a January Term trip to Ghana. Weimar's dream is to help improve health care in Africa after she completes a medical degree.

The memory haunts Ashlee Weimar '04.

A teenager with a swollen face entered the hospital in Swaziland, Africa, and told of a year of continuous nosebleeds.

"This girl has advanced leukemia and I know she will die because there is no chemotherapy in Swaziland," Weimar thought as she listened.

Two weeks later Weimar stood helplessly by as the girl suffered her last nosebleed. Weimar knew then that she did not want to watch 16-year-olds die due to lack of treatment; she wanted to help them leave African hospitals happy and healthy.

Weimar's internship in Swaziland – arranged through Linfield's cooperation with Oregon State University – was a world away from her home in Arlington, a small town on the Columbia River. As she administered vaccinations to animals on the family farm, she developed an interest in science. Today, Weimar, with her biochemistry degree in hand, looks back on these chores as the catalyst that sparked her goal to be a doctor in Africa.

Weimar was based at the Good Shepherd Hospital in the Lubombo Region of Swaziland. Originally a mission hospital, it had six doctors and 10 medical departments. She rotated through the hospital departments, observing patients with tuberculosis, counseling mothers about preventing HIV transmission to their children, and learning

everything she could about medical treatment in Africa.

Swaziland faces a number of health crises including AIDS. More than 38 percent of the adults are HIV-positive, and when Weimar was there no anti-retroviral drugs were available. Many people refuse testing and ignore education efforts, Weimar said, because of cultural pressure.

Health care services throughout the country are poor to non-existent. Many patients travel 80 miles or more to Good Shepherd because it provides some of the best health care in the country.

One woman, left untreated for seven days in a government hospital, died at Good Shepherd after her family had brought her 70 miles hoping she would receive treatment there.

Weimar's experiences deepened her conviction to pursue a medical degree and also made her grateful for her home and family.

"I told myself every day how blessed I was to have my family behind me and to have grown up in a place where no opportunities were held back," she said.

Weimar returned to Africa with the January Term class Emergence of Modern Ghana. Although the class did not focus on the health care system, Weimar had the opportunity to meet with a doctor who operated a free clinic supported entirely by donations and volunteer work.

"It was pretty amazing to see the communities pull together," said Weimar.

Most of Africa has an overwhelming need for orthopedics, surgery and general practice, areas Weimar may pursue. She hopes to attend a medical school that offers programs in international health, HIV studies and rural health.

Robert Wolcott, professor of chemistry, called Weimar one of the most capable students he has taught at Linfield.

"She has a very strong drive to succeed at whatever she undertakes, which translates into an unusually positive work ethic," Wolcott said.

Weimar passionately wants to return to Africa, but she is torn about where she will ultimately practice. She believes she could make a huge difference if she practiced medicine in the United States, and donated part of her income to a medical organization in Africa.

She is haunted by the image of that one girl in Swaziland.

"To ease one person's suffering, that would be enough," she said.

– Laura Graham '07