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CHILDSPRING INTERNATIONAL: A BEACON OF HELP AND HOPE

Christina Jenkins Porter never thought she was cut out for humanitarian work.

During her student days at Furman, the now 41-year-old Atlanta resident didn't like her experience with Collegiate Educational Service Corps, helping children at the Shriners Hospital in Greenville. She recalls that it seemed presumptuous and arrogant to think that she, in perfect health, had anything in the way of help to offer an extremely ill child.

Con conversationally fluent in French and German and armed with a political science degree, Porter graduated in 1987 and pictured becoming a globe-trotting diplomat or a Fortune 500 executive.

For more than 10 years, she lived in the corporate world. She worked for a stock brokerage, an environmental consulting firm and Mapics, a publicly traded software maker. She learned how to handle everything from managing customer service to writing software code, from handling payroll to facilities management.

It was all just setting her up for what was in store.

Her last job in the for-profit world, with NetVendor, was a victim of the dot-com crash in 2000. As a stop-gap measure while looking for another job, Porter set up camp at First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta to help former Presbyterian Church (USA) moderator Fahed Abu-Akel. Another volunteer at the church, Rose Emily Bermudez, noticed Porter's knack for office-based problem solving. Bermudez was building her own missionary project, called Childspring International, to bring sick children from poverty-stricken countries to the United States for medical care. She asked Porter to work for her, and Porter agreed — on the condition that she'd do it for only six months.

That was five years ago. Childspring International's noble cause drew her in.

Childspring has brought hundreds of children with profound medical needs to the States for treatment. Its best known client was 3-month-old Noor al-Zahra, who became the subject of around-the-clock media attention and earned the nickname "Baby Noor" when she came to Atlanta from Iraq in early 2006 to be treated for spina bifida.

Childspring is funded by individual donors and the Presbyterian Church (USA). It relies heavily on volunteer families to host children visiting the States for medical treatment.



Christina Porter with Bibi, a child from Tanzania who as an infant lost the lower part of her arm in a fire. With Childspring's help, and after several surgeries requiring skin grafts and tissue expanders, Bibi happily displays her new prosthetic arm (below). Photos courtesy Christina Porter.

Not only did Porter never picture herself working for a charitable organization, but Childspring's mission couldn't be further from what she thought she found interesting. Before she started with Childspring, she says, she didn't much care for doctors and didn't think she would like working with children.

Now she can "spew out" medical terminology and health care industry jargon as if she's been doing it for ages, says Rebecca L. Sigmund, a 1980 Furman graduate who serves on Childspring's board of directors.

"Christina also has a strong stomach," says Sigmund, a partner in Powell Goldstein, an Atlanta law firm.

It's not uncommon, Porter says, for her to be in a child's hospital room when a doctor or nurse is performing a procedure that would make most people queasy. During one visit, Porter was on hand to watch a nurse pull a long tube out of a child's skull.

Childspring's clients, most of whom are from Africa, Asia and Latin America, are afflicted with severe injuries or diseases — eye cancer, large facial tumors, deformities, severe burns. Many of the children can't get treatment where they live and are running out of options.

"We're usually a family's last resort," Porter says. "There are many countries that don't

have basic, much less modern, medical facilities, equipment, or trained medical professionals."

Porter's title at Childspring is USA Director, but her duties are wide-ranging, and she relies on her background working for nascent-stage businesses to help her resolve problems. Among other duties, she serves as Childspring's media spokeswoman; arranges with flight attendants to have their airlines swap comp seats for a child; finds host families in cities like Boise, Idaho, where she doesn't know anyone; spends the night in the hospital with a child; hosts children in her own home; and counsels families and children who are going through extreme emotional turmoil.

"With Christina, it's not just about holding the hands of the host families, but coordinating whatever comes up emotionally with the families and with the children," Sigmund says.

Although Porter still would love a job that calls for her to rack up frequent-flyer miles traveling the globe to meet with corporate clients, Childspring has helped satisfy her urge to travel by giving her plenty of exposure to world cultures. A partial list of countries where children she's helped live reads like the United Nations: Afghanistan, Iraq, Haiti, Ivory Coast, Tanzania, Paraguay, Moldova, Honduras, Ethiopia, Colombia.

"It's been a great way to share cultures, food and language without having to leave your home!" she says.

— ANDY PETERS '92

The author is a reporter for the Fulton County (Ga.) Daily Report. To learn more about Childspring International, visit the Web at www.childspringintl.org.

