

Sisters woman making a difference in American Samoa

By Jim Cornelius
News Editor

Kathy Deggendorfer is really good at making connections. As an artist, philanthropist, and businesswoman, she knows a lot of people in many different walks of life. When she sees a need, she often has a pretty good idea of who might be able to meet it. And she's good at persuading them to step up.

Recently, she brought that talent to bear to help out in American Samoa. Frank and Kathy Deggendorfer traveled there last year to assist a Casey Eye Institute medical mission to American Samoa, helping to meet critical ophthalmological needs in the American territory. This year, she returned with a somewhat broader focus.

"While I was there, it became apparent that there were gaps in the way some things were done," she told *The Nugget*. "I kind of identified three areas."

The first area was bringing the ophthalmology program at Lyndon B. Johnson Hospital up to speed. That meant helping to get training for staff and decent equipment for their work.

"They say, 'We don't want Mercedes; we just want a decent, working Chevrolet,'" Deggendorfer said.

Part of her work on her trip earlier this month was to inventory and catalog equipment — what works and what needs fixing or replacing.

That includes the most basic needs — like working hydraulic chairs and stools to put a patient in the right position for an eye exam.

"It's easily fixable stuff, but they're so beaten down that they don't even think they can ask for that," Deggendorfer said.

She said the hospital also needs to have ophthalmologic assistants trained up on equipment so they can use it effectively, and having doctors on staff so that they are not as dependant on medical missions.

"They need to have great, trained physicians... so OHSU (Oregon Health Sciences University) has kind of taken that program under their wing," Deggendorfer said.

Deggendorfer brought along a member of the OHSU Foundation to talk to folks and get an on-the-ground assessment of needs.

She noted that Casey Eye Institute at OHSU is sending specialists to help Dr. Siatu'u handle a complex workload.

"It's not just run-of-the-mill vision problems," Deggendorfer explained. "There's rampant diabetes, and diabetes wrecks havoc. Very, very tricky cases."

In another arena, Deggendorfer brought along Matt Schinderman of the OSU Cascades sustainability program to look into alternatives to help American Samoa with its solid-waste disposal problems. The communal culture includes a lot of parties and feasting — with food served and carried in Styrofoam clamshells. That creates a lot of Styrofoam waste. Schinderman worked with locals to explore possible alternatives and to look at the possibility of burning waste to generate power.

Deggendorfer believes that there is a possibility to create



PHOTO BY JERRY BALDOCK

Dr. Ben Siatu'u with Akenese and Kathy Deggendorfer on the day Dr. Siatu'u received his diploma from Casey Eye Institute and OHSU.

a mutually beneficial relationship between OSU Cascades and American Samoa that would allow the school to use programs there as educational pilot projects, while at the same time engineering solutions to very real challenges.

There are also possibilities for projects addressing fisheries and plastic waste in the oceans.

Deggendorfer noted that The Roundhouse Foundation, of which she is a trustee, provided OSU Cascades with a grant for assessment of project possibilities.

As an artist, Deggendorfer has developed contacts with the University of Oregon's museum program. That was

also tapped on the trip to American Samoa.

"They have a museum that has never been curated," she explained.

"I was scoping that out. What we're hoping to do is get someone from the University of Oregon museum school over there and help get that museum up to speed."

Sometimes connections can be just plain fun. Deggendorfer recounted seeing a car pull up into a parking lot next to her with an Oregon "O" sticker and a Tennessee Titans flag on it. She had a pretty good idea what that meant. She tapped on the window and introduced herself.

Turns out the occupants

are relations of Oregon Ducks Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback Marcus Mariota, now playing in the NFL for the Titans. Pictures were taken — which Deggendorfer was able to get to Mariota through yet another connection: Hall of Fame quarterback and football announcer Dan Fouts of Sisters.

Connections are what it's all about — and Kathy Deggendorfer is hoping that her work and the work of others who have made the trip will burnish a strong one between her home state and American Samoa.

"This could be a really long-term, really great connection," she said.



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