

Practicing medicine in the middle of the Pacific

Canvasback Missions bring health care to remote islands

By Kathleen Ellyn
Wallowa County Chieftain

Registered nurse Janice Bailey of Enterprise spent part of her September in the Marshall Islands, a speck of land in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

She volunteered with Canvasback Missions, a nonprofit that was started in 1981 by the husband/wife team of Jaime and Jacque Spence. During their sailing years, the Spences had come to love the people of the Marshall Islands and care about their problems. The couple learned that skilled surgeons were desperately needed in the islands, which are accessible only by sea.

The Spences created Canvasback Missions and began building a hospital sailing ship. Their catamaran was launched in 1986. Since then, volunteer doctors with experience in medical, dental and eye care have visited the islands six to eight times per year, aided by a small army of nurses, logistical specialists, anesthesiologists and other volunteers. The mission only provides medical care that is unavailable locally, so that no jobs are taken away from local healthworkers. Additionally, mission doctors often train local doctors as well.

Last September Bailey accompanied doctor Art Geibel and his wife and daughter to the island of Ebeye in the Marshall Islands of the Pacific. Geibel does cataract surgeries both at Wallowa Memorial Hospital and at his clinic in Walla Walla.

On the September trip, a 10-member eye team and 18 member dental team arrived on Ebeye. Doctors and staff were housed on a U.S. military base on nearby Kwaj Island and took the ferry to Ebeye daily.

While there, the eye team saw 444 patients and per-



Photo courtesy Janice Bailey

Part of the medical team is pictured here. The front row consists of a local Marshalllese worker, the surgical manager, Janice Bailey of Enterprise and two scrub technicians. The back row consists of a surgical assistant and translator, Dr. Ryckman of Ohio, a practical nurse and translator, an ophthalmologist from Maine and Dr. Art Geibel from Walla Walla.



Photo courtesy Janice Bailey

The Marshall Islands are stunning but remote, and good medical care is unfordable for most residents.

formed 122 surgeries. The cost of such care would normally have been over \$400,000, but thanks to Canvasback Missions and the generous volunteers, islanders received this care free.

The dental team performed 1,894 procedures with a value of \$252,399.

LOCAL RESPONSE

The people are gracious and grateful for the work of the missions and wait patiently for doctors to work their way down the long lines, Bailey said.

The health conditions for the residents of these beautiful

islands are very poor. Reliant on food brought by boat rather than historic diets, an estimated 90 percent of the Islanders now suffer pre-diabetic or diabetic conditions.

The work with the younger generation is vitally important because 50 percent of the Islands population is under the age of 12 and living conditions are difficult to improve.

Local officials told the volunteers that employment is so scarce that when a single individual from a family is able to get a job on the U.S. military base, the extended family immediately moves from other islands to Ebeye and the en-

tire family attempts to exist on the income of one good wage-earner.

As a result, many hous-



Photo courtesy Janice Bailey

Levi Evans, a student at Walla Walla University, and Dr. Art Geibel, also from Walla Walla, hold a piece of equipment that was broken and later fixed by an electrician on the island.

es on Ebeye house families of 22 or more. It is the fifth most-densely populated island in the world, with 15,000 people living on 80 acres.

Despite the difficulties of life in the Marshall Islands the mission group felt blessed to be able to volunteer, Bailey said.

During their stay, their teams experienced what they interpreted as blessings from God many times. An example, Bailey said, was when a surgical microscope shorted out.

The machine was essential to delicate surgery. It shorted out on the last surgery before lunchtime, so the group gathered to pray. All of the equipment they needed had been shipped in weeks prior to their visit and there was no way to either get new equipment, parts or a repair person.

"We had no idea what would happen," Bailey said.

As the group went down

to eat their lunch they saw that four Seabees had arrived on the island. The crew volunteered to help the surgical teams.

"I asked one of the Seabees who was volunteering for the eye team what he did and he told me he was an electrician," Bailey recalled.

"I started to cry and asked him 'Do you believe in God?'," she said.

"Yes ma'am," he said.

And he fixed the short in the surgical microscope.

"It's always rewarding," Bailey said. "It's challenging, you think you're going to do one thing and you might do anything. Even the surgeons are emptying garbages. But it's rewarding."

If you would like to donate to Canvasback, volunteer for a mission, or join a prayer group in support of the mission, visit www.canvasback.org for more information.

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