

Luck and circumstance

Cannon Beach nurse reflects on a lifetime of care

By Brenna Visser
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At first glance, serving people in Clatsop County versus those in a refugee camp on the other side of the world seem to have little cross-over.

But Margo Lalich, a long-time nurse and public health worker based in Cannon Beach, has spent much of her time doing both. Her most recent trip to serve Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh illuminated that common ground.

“(Working at a refugee camp) sounds heroic and romantic, but it’s not that complicated when you recognize the humanity in one another. In some ways, we all come from the same place: suffering,” she said. “When I look at a child in a shelter, or I see people who lost children in the migration, or lost a child to diphtheria, I see myself as a mother and I see my children. Those families go into shelters of tarps and bamboo sticks and they make it their home.

“When we put aside the politics, and the religion, you’re just helping mothers, fathers and children.”

Last fall, Lalich spent a month at the Nayapara and Kutupalong refugee camps through Medical Team International. The nonprofit helps recruit and train local health care workers on proper sanitation, preventing the spread of disease and supporting safe home births.

As of April, there are more than 781,000 Rohingya refugees living in camps and settlements, according to the BBC. The Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim minority, have been driven out of their home country of Myanmar since 2015 due to religious persecution.

For the past 20 years, Lalich has interwoven a local career in public health with frequent trips to volunteer at refugee camps around the world. Her life reflects a blended passion for connecting with other cultures and health care, two ideas both deeply rooted in her upbringing.

Child of ‘adventurers’

Born in Liberia, Lalich was the child of “adventurers,” as she called them, who met in Greece during her mother’s stint working with Hungarian refugees in Europe in the 1950s. Over the course of her childhood, Lalich grew to love learning about different cultures and experiences.

Lalich decided to study sociology at the University of Washington. But as she studied, she couldn’t help but long for travel.

To help finance her adventures, she worked as a fisherman in Alaska, where she met the father of her children — the man she eventually moved to Clatsop County for in 1987. She received a nursing degree from Clatsop Community College and began work as a nurse at Providence Seaside Hospital for 10 years before joining the county in 1998 as a public health nurse.

“I’ve always had a passion for public health,” she said.



Women community health workers demonstrate hand washing as part of the health education program for families at a refugee camp in Bangladesh.



Margo Lalich waits for a team of community health workers to arrive at the end of their day from doing household visits at a refugee camp in Bangladesh.



Margo Lalich, a public health nurse who lives in Cannon Beach, has cared for people in refugee camps.

“Whether it’s in Clatsop County or a refugee camp, standards for public health are the same. It’s water and sanitation, basic hygiene ... it’s taking care of basic needs.”

After receiving her master’s degree in public health, Lalich balanced her love for working abroad and keeping a home base for her family. In 2002 she transitioned into working full-time with the county to help manage the public health program, including the county’s immunization strategy, emergency preparedness and other services before becoming the director in 2010.

Lalich stepped down in 2013 to pursue an opportunity to be the director of the Multnomah Education Service District.

She found her experience working out in the field as a significant asset while addressing emergency management at home.

“It’s really informed my practice. We have a very cumbersome system of practice in this country. When you work in other places that aren’t burdened by complexities, you get to focus on the issues,” she said. “Emergency response is a perfect example. Here it is so complex, we make so many assumptions. And yet you can do a lot to take care of a lot of people. Our expectations are just high-

er here. Keeping that in perspective is a tremendous asset.”

Daunting scale

Some aspects of working abroad will always be different. The sheer scale of people who need treatment at one time is daunting. Some of the most specific challenges to treating public health in camps are the lack of public infrastructure and dangerously low vaccination rates for preventable diseases.

“People are dying on a daily basis from things we don’t even think about here,” she said.

But to Lalich, her passion to serve is driven by a belief that human suffering doesn’t have borders.

“I’m aware that I’m in a different environment. But we see trauma in our own communities — it just presents differently,” she said. “I guess I feel like a chameleon: I deploy and

I adapt. I feel like I’m coming home when I deploy. I’m not thinking about lack of resources, or my discomfort. I just see what is in front of me and what needs to be done.”

Last trip

After 20 years, Lalich decided to make her trip to Bangladesh her last.

After 30 years of living in Clatsop County, she intends to move away from Cannon Beach to pursue more independent projects related to public health. But one lesson will stay with her wherever she goes next.

“When I come back (to the United States), I recognize it’s purely luck and circumstance I was born where I was, and not a refugee somewhere else. I never take that for granted,” she said. “So I take the best of what I have experienced and try to share that with others.”

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