

A great need, a heart to help

Thursday, June 15, 2006

It's been said that great givers are those who are best at living.

No wonder Stephanie Van Dyke sounds so excited when she talks about spending this summer in a village in Africa, without running water or electricity, building a medical clinic out of mud bricks.

She's bringing along her parents, Jeff and Heidi Van Dyke. And they're "thrilled to go," Jeff says, even though they won't be eating the kind of food they serve in their Papa Haydn restaurants in Portland.

Stephanie's excitement has proven contagious. Her parents, who co-own the restaurants with Heidi's sister and brother-in-law, have loved the restaurant business. They've also enjoyed their many travels. "But we have yet to find our passion," Jeff says. "Stephanie found hers at a young age. We may find ours through her. We both suspect this trip will be the beginning of us finding our passion, to be honest."

Even as a child, Stephanie Van Dyke was driven to help others. "She had a complete lack of interest in money and a burning desire to do good and make a difference," Jeff says. Stephanie volunteered for many charities when she was growing up, and as a student at Whitman College.

After graduation, in 1999, Stephanie took a year to travel the globe, working as a volunteer. The first place she landed was Uganda, teaching English. "Health care was dismal," she says. "Kids were dying from simple ailments. Somebody would break a leg and crawl for the rest of their life.

"It's a beautiful country, and the people were so friendly. But my time was wasted. They had no need to learn English; they'll never leave their village."

At the end of her volunteer year, fueled by a desire to make a difference in the Third World, Stephanie decided she wanted to become a doctor. At 29, she has just finished her first year at Albany Medical College in New York.

"The summer between first and second year is the only one that's free, when we can do anything we want," Stephanie explains. After her grandma died and left her some money, Stephanie had a choice: She could buy a home in Albany, "or I could go ahead with my goal and go back to Africa."

She's going to use her money to build a small medical clinic and five or six small huts, to house volunteers who will travel to Uganda and work in the clinic. "On a whim, I asked my parents, 'Will you guys please go with me to Africa?' And they said, 'Sure, Steph.'"





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The Van Dykes won't travel alone. All kinds of people – including some they've never met, friends of friends – will join them. (There's room for more, if you're looking for a summer adventure.) A general contractor who's headed projects for Habitat for Humanity will supervise.

Stephanie has kept in contact with friends in Uganda. She asked one, a man named John Kalule, to select what she calls "the most desperate community in Uganda that's safe enough for us to be there." He recommended Ddegeya. "It's not on a map, it's so small," Stephanie says. "It's in south Uganda, which is very safe, unlike the north."

The group, along with hired villagers, will use cob-style building techniques, Stephanie says. "We'll make bricks out of mud on the job site, let the sun cure the bricks, then mix cement for mortar and put a cement plaster on the outside. Then we'll paint it to seal it. So fewer critters can get in."

Stephanie remembers her last visit to Uganda, when John worked as her assistant. "I had rats crawling on me at night, and he helped me seal the holes. We had a fire-ant attack, and he helped get fire ants off me, and helped clean our village."

John has arranged for volunteers to live in a large house in the village. "So housing is free, if anybody wants to come." (For information, or to donate to the nonprofit, go to www.engeye.com.)

Stephanie's long-term goal is to finish medical school, become a physician, and spend eight months a year in Ddegeya, teaching local villagers medical techniques and basic health care. "I'd spend the other months in the U.S., recruiting physicians to come and do more training."

This year the buildings will go up. Next year she hopes to bring medical supplies and medical personnel. Professors at her medical school have agreed to participate, and she will recruit medical students across the country.

"These people need surgery, of course, but for the most part they need the basics. They need Band-Aids, condoms, the most simple things." This year, for starters, the group will deliver mosquito nets to hang over the beds of every village family. "Since malaria, transmitted by mosquitoes, is one of the largest causes of death in Africa . . . we thought we could start improving health by taking this simple step."

Nothing Stephanie is planning sounds like a simple step, to anyone but her. But many have been inspired by her excitement and dedication. "She's following her passion," says Jeff. "And she's getting guidance from somewhere I think we're not privy to."







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Stephanie thinks "anybody in Oregon would do the same thing or feel the same way had they had the opportunity to live that lifestyle, and see the unnecessary suffering every day. I don't think there's anything heroic about it. Anybody would do the same, if they were given that opportunity."

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