

SU pharmacy students bring HOPE to people in the Pacific

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When college students travel to the Pacific, it's usually for a vacation filled with sightseeing and sun tanning.

That's not quite what Alexis Hargbol and Kofi Kyei-Mensah did.

These Shenandoah University students experienced the Pacific in a completely different way.

Instead of a comfortable cruise, Hargbol and Kyei-Mensah chose to participate in Pacific Partnership 2012, an annual mission carried out by the U.S. Navy Pacific Fleet and Project HOPE, a global health education and humanitarian organization based in Clarke County.

"[You can] take a break from the office and help people," said Project HOPE media relations specialist Geraldine Carroll of the medical professionals who attend the trip. "It's a cool opportunity to be involved in good work."

The mission of the Pacific Partnership is to bring medical, dental, veterinary and civil help to communities with limited resources. This year, the partnership's destinations are the coastal communities of Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Cambodia.

Project HOPE's volunteers come from a wide range of medical professions, including surgeons, anesthesiologists, internal medicine specialists, pediatricians, pharmacists, midwives and nurses.

Hargbol and Kyei-Mensah are fourth-year pharmacy students at SU's Bernard J. Dunn School of Pharmacy. As part of its advanced pharmacy program, every year the school sends four students to volunteer with Project HOPE.

Kyei-Mensah said that he "did not waste any time" when the applications became available.

In his first year of pharmacy school, he heard the director of Project HOPE give a speech. From then on, he knew he wanted to participate in one of the organization's humanitarian missions.

Kyei-Mensah, 33, is originally from a village in Ghana. He said that his upbringing in Africa influenced his choice of career.

"It was my driving force to be in the field of pharmacy," he said. "Getting an education can teach you that simple information can save lives. In Ghana, people used to die from diarrhea... It doesn't make sense because getting hydrated [prevents that]. But they don't know that."

Hargbol, 24, is from Manassas. She called distributing medications to the locals of these countries "humbling."

"A lot of patients hadn't seen medical care their entire lives. It was on the extreme end of what you see in the U.S.," Hargbol said. "They really needed our help."

While Project HOPE supplies medical volunteers for the partnership, the Navy provides the ship and crew they use to travel, as well as Navy doctors and nurses who work with the volunteers. The ship that transports the teams is called the U.S.S. Mercy.

The Mercy set sail from San Diego in May and will return once the mission is complete around Aug. 10. Hargbol and Kyei-Mensah participated in a rotation from May 21 to the beginning of July, in which they visited Indonesia and the Philippines.

"I was nervous at first when we got off the ship," Hargbol said. "I didn't know what to expect... But the people were so welcoming. They brought us fresh food and fruit."



Shenandoah University pharmacy student Kofi Kyei-Mensah (left) entertains children at a medical site to put them at ease. Right, fellow pharmacy student Alexis Hargbol aboard the U.S.S. Mercy.



Volunteers and Navy medical professionals participate in rotations in which they travel to locations to treat locals.

These treatment excursions are called Medical Civil Assistance Programs, or MECAPs. While many of their patients can be treated onsite, the teams treat some in more sophisticated operating rooms on the ship.

Working with other pharmacists on and off the ship, Hargbol and Kyei-Mensah spent much of their time packaging and distributing medications, as well as preparing IVs for patients.

There were often crowds of locals lining up to receive help from the volunteers.

At the end of the third day of his rotation in a remote area of Indonesia, Kyei-Mensah said the teams had treated 2,000 patients. He called it “exhausting, but rewarding.”

But the volunteers and Navy workers only had so much time and so many resources.

“People traveled from far to come see us. To turn them away was heartbreaking,” said Kyei-Mensah. “I vividly remember one lady who broke down in tears because we couldn’t treat her... Not to be able to treat one more person because of our resources was very hard.”

Despite the sadness of turning patients away, Kyei-Mensah said that he loved seeing the gratitude on the faces of those who received treatment.

Hargbol said that her favorite aspect of the trip was bonding with the other people working on the mission.

“We all wanted to better lives and make a difference. It made us closer,” Hargbol said.

This mission not only provides humanitarian and medical aid where it is most needed, it also aims to train people in remote areas how to better handle natural disasters.

“There’s been a greater occurrence of natural disasters, so [the volunteers] try to provide expertise on how to act in case of a medical emergency,” Carroll said.

Hargbol said the trip has changed her world view.

“I realized... the things we take for granted. Some people we saw didn’t have the education to know they needed to brush their teeth,” Hargbol said. “It made me appreciate the things I have.”

Kyei-Mensah said that the mission confirmed his future aspirations to continue to give medical aid to people in underserved areas of the world.

“Going to Asia and seeing such abject poverty made me realize it’s not just Africa that needs help. Everybody needs health care,” he said. “This trip has shown me... when people pool their resources, they can do good.”

The Pacific Partnership is now in its seventh year. To read SU students’ blogs about their experiences with Project HOPE, go to rxprojecthope.blogspot.com.