



# Jennifer Wall '99, M'00: Easing Scars and Offering Hope

by Nadine M. Hasencz

In the summer of 2006, physician assistant (PA) Jennifer Wall—a DeSales University graduate and Reading, Pa., native—boarded a plane bound for Malawi, a country in sub-Saharan Africa. She was clueless regarding what she'd encounter as she embarked upon a medical missionary trip across the Atlantic Ocean to another continent, prepared with little other than her burn-treatment skills, a few crates packed with medical supplies, an e-mail contact, and the knowledge that someone would meet her at the airport.

Three years later, the 33-year-old is preparing for her fifth trip to Malawi as founder and president of Africa Burn Relief, a Phoenix, Ariz.-based organization that has provided burn treatment to approximately 100 patients of all ages in Africa at no charge since 2006. Due to Wall's commitment, the organization has recently been awarded 501C3 (nonprofit) status.

"Since the day I returned [from my first trip to Africa] in 2006, there hasn't been a day gone by that I haven't worked on Africa Burn Relief, typed it, or heard it in my head," Wall says. "It's now a way of life."

Each time she's been in Africa, Wall has worked for two weeks to two months at Nkhoma Hospital, approximately 36 miles from Lilongwe, Malawi's capital. On her 2010 trip, Wall hopes to stay for a year and begin burn care at the larger Kamuzu Central Hospital in Lilongwe. Wall's goal is to teach burn treatment to medical professionals in Africa so that local staff can care for burn victims in her absence.

"Not one doctor was trained in burn care in Nkhoma. That's where the need came for founding an organization," she says. "They have a huge education gap there for this specialty and a million others, but this [burn treatment] is what I know how to do."

Ninety-five percent of burn injuries occur in poor and low-income countries, while only 5 percent occur in the modern world, Wall says. In the United States, most burns do not commonly result in fatality and typically result from preventable scalding accidents with bathwater or cooking water. Whether or not he or she possesses healthcare insurance, a burn victim who arrives at a U.S. hospital is going to receive treatment.

In contrast, burns in Malawi stem from poverty, Wall says, explaining that only 2 percent of Malawi households include a stove. “They have to cook over a fire on the ground three times a day. Every hut has a raging fire looming outside of it. It keeps them warm through the night,” Wall says. “Imagine having kids—toddlers to teenagers—running around it. Moms are cooking on it, and kids are clenched at their legs. In the United States, the top of the stove is out of a child’s reach. In Malawi, kids are face to face with fire.”

To make matters worse, “in Africa, it may take up to five days to raise transportation fees, they’re dehydrated when they finally get to the hospital, and due to local healthcare specialty inexperience, a patient may suffer the consequence of death,” Wall says.

Wall is encouraged by the fact that she can do so much with so little in Africa and can effect great change easily and relatively inexpensively. She says that medical professionals in Malawi were practicing 1920s techniques when she arrived. Simple procedures—such as using soap, water, and gauze on a wound; killing bacteria by using bleach in the appropriate dilution; and decreasing a wound’s smell—have improved patient outcomes at low cost.

“A problem I found the first year is that nobody wanted to take care of these [burned] kids because they [the wounds] were festering. You’d walk in and almost fall over from the smell,” she recalls. “You’d find blankets on the wound. One blanket would become saturated with the wound’s liquids, and another blanket would be applied in an effort to decrease the fetid odor.”

Wall says she deals with the horror by dissociation, a technique often used by surgeons and other medical providers. “There are not a lot of people who treat burns because it’s horrific,” she says. “Because demand is high to aid this type of patient, it makes my desire greater.

“Becoming a PA in a highly specialized field has provided me with amazing opportunities in both the U.S. and the developing world,” she adds.

By asking friends and family, and by hosting two “beef-and-beer” paid-admission events per year, each including a silent auction, Wall manages to raise enough money—approximately \$30,000 yearly—to meet Nkhoma Hospital’s burn-care needs, including a prevention program, surgery fees, high-protein foods, medications, and other expenses for all patients. She notes that the same amount of money in the United States might cover one hospitalized burn patient for one day.

“I realized that, rather inexpensively, I could make an impact by decreasing child mortality and complication rates,” she says.

The worst burn result Wall has ever seen, she says, was that of a 19-year-old male whose lip became fused to his chest after receiving no acute treatment when he fell into a fire during an epileptic seizure at age 10. (Wall notes that epileptics in Africa commonly fall into fires because they can’t afford to buy medication that prevents seizures. Villagers view epileptics as possessed by evil and, therefore, will not pull them out of the fire.) At first, the man refused Wall’s offer to fix his deformity because he feared he would be unable to continue to make his living as a beggar. He changed his mind, Wall recalls, and returned to the hospital two and a half weeks later, allowing Wall to perform life-changing reconstructive surgery.

Because surgery is only the beginning of burn care, Africa Burn Relief maintains a record of patient villages and then travels to the villages in search of patients requiring follow-up care. If village chiefs know of anyone in need, they recommend the organization’s services. Wall says that of the 28 patients screened this year, 18 opted to remain at the hospital for treatment. “There will always be a backlog of burn scars in Africa because, prior to 2006, surgical intervention was not often performed, causing debilitating scars,” she says. “It’s a matter of finding burn survivors and educating them that they can functionally be improved.”

When not in Africa, Wall lives in Phoenix. She performs pediatric reconstructive surgery at Banner Desert Medical Center, Mesa,



**Burn victim Carol, a 13-month-old baby, is one of the approximately 100 patients Jennifer Wall '99 has helped through the Africa Burn Relief program. Before and after photos show Carol with a burn scar contracture of her leg, which was released by surgery—allowing the baby a chance of learning to walk and to lead a more normal life.**



**The severity and frequency of burns** in Malawi stem from poverty. Only two percent of households have access to electricity, and most Malawians depend on open fires as a source of heat and a means of cooking meals. The proximity of fire, as well as inadequate medical care for burn victims, contributes to severe and life-threatening burns and scarring for many children and adults in Malawi.

Ariz., during the week and on weekend, she works per diem in the emergency room at Banner Thunderbird Medical Center, Glendale, Ariz. She also consults on Nkhoma Hospital’s challenging cases via telephone and photographs.

A selfless individual, Wall is dedicated to her patients and to a profession she almost didn’t pursue because she had been considering a career in marine biology. “I didn’t even know what a PA was. I went to the career library and picked it out of a book,” she says. “To think you could become a doctor, dentist, or lawyer in my hometown was kind of unheard of.”

Wall credits her strong work ethic to her blue-collar upbringing. She also credits her father—an electrician with his own business—for sparking her interest in science by encouraging her and her siblings to enter science fairs.

Wall entered DeSales University in 1997 and received a bachelor’s degree in medical studies in 1999. In 2000, she graduated from DeSales with a master’s degree in Physician Assistant Studies.

After graduating, Wall held a series of brief jobs until she landed in her desired profession of burn care at Lehigh Valley Hospital. She worked there for two and a half years before applying to burn centers in areas in which she suspected it might be fun to live. Relocating to the Arizona Burn Center in Phoenix offered an improved lifestyle. She worked there as lead mid-level provider from 2003 until 2008.

While Wall made her first trip to Africa in 2006, she says she has always been interested in African literature, culture, and music. She had been planning to go to Africa by joining the Peace Corps

when her mentor, Dr. Steve Miller—a general and hand surgeon in Phoenix who had participated in a number of medical missions—put her in touch via e-mail with a group of medical volunteers from around the world who were working at Nkhoma Hospital. “He asked, ‘Why don’t you help them, and help with burn treatment, which is what you know best?’” she recalls.

Wall says she has grown from her small-town suburban roots, stating that her locale was not particularly diverse. It was not uncommon, during her childhood, to encounter KKK members picketing in her neighborhood.

“Now I work in a totally different culture, and I’m the minority,” she says. “I have taken myself completely out of my comfort zone, which has been a challenging, eye-opening, and rewarding experience.”

In April, Wall became engaged to another medical missionary, Dr. Will Dean, an ophthalmologist whom she met in Malawi. Originally from South Africa, Dean was trained in the United Kingdom and is working in Africa via a U.K. foundation. They are planning a May 2010 wedding at Lake Malawi.

“We have a mutual interest in aiding underserved areas in Africa,” she says. “And we plan to live in Malawi to continue our common goals.”

Wall invites anyone interested in her cause to contact her by e-mail at [AfricaBurnRelief@gmail.com](mailto:AfricaBurnRelief@gmail.com) or via Facebook. The Web site [AfricaBurnRelief.org](http://AfricaBurnRelief.org) is expected to be up within the next few months.