

Hope from Afar

Jennifer Wall wanted to make a difference. How one Coronado resident found her calling in a tiny landlocked country 10,000 miles away.

BY KEVIN VAUGHAN

IMAGINE A BALMY EVENING IN THE AFRICAN country of Malawi. Stars crowd the dark sky of the Southern Hemisphere; campfires dot the horizon. But this is no idyllic view of African life: the campfires here are vital to the people's survival, but they are also a source of danger. That the people's lives revolve around open flame, it comes as no surprise that severe burns are common in this part of the world, especially among children.

Enter Jennifer Wall, a young physician's assistant eager to use her burn treatment and reconstruction experience to make a difference. In 2006, Jennifer moved into a home in Coronado on 12th Street and started the foundation that would become her life's mission, Africa Burn Relief. When I meet her at MacAlpine's, she brings a thick photo album full of pictures that demonstrate the organization's impact: images of burn victims, the stages of their treatment, and the happy faces of those given new life without severe deformity or pain. As we flip through this, Jennifer tells her story of how a little house in Coronado has become a source of hope and relief to people half a world away.

What made you found Africa Burn Relief?

I wanted to go into the Peace Corps and travel to Africa on medical missions, but I was advised that medical volunteers in the Peace Corps do not work on native populations; they only service the medical needs of the other volunteers. I wanted to make a difference with populations in need. I learned of the situation in Malawi and decided to focus on a rural area around the town of Nkhoma. There is a hospital there that serves 30,000 people with 240 beds. My first visit, I went by myself and saw that it wasn't

enough to go and treat a few burns; the whole system of getting people access to timely proper treatment meant changing perceptions in the culture as well as improving infrastructure. I was looking at making a long-term commitment, and a foundation was the solution.

Why is the situation so desperate in this part of Africa?

The problem is lack of infrastructure and outdated tribal beliefs. The ambulances in Malawi are bicycles, if you're lucky. When a burn happens in these remote areas, the people

do not immediately seek medical attention; they seek out their village witch doctor. Witch doctors traditionally treat burns by burning the skin around the burn, making it worse. By the time the victim seeks treatment, the wound is usually in very bad shape. Once they get to the hospital, supplies are very limited. For instance, there are no ventilators for facial burns, and they have to wash out sponges and use them on different patients.

Head-first falls into fires are very common. Because parents need to spend all their time providing basic needs, children are watched by other children. Seventy-three percent of our patients are less than five years old.

What differences have you made so far?

To begin with, let's compare the cost of burn treatment. In the United States, a one-year hospital stay for a burn victim would cost \$2-3 million. In Malawi, a similar stay costs \$350. Needless to say, money goes a lot farther there than here. A typical Africa Burn Relief fund-raiser will raise \$30,000, which pays for a team including a burn treatment specialist to travel to Malawi and has also allowed us to donate modern equipment to the hospital and provide training in the latest burn treatment procedures. Something I've been able to do from afar is install technology that allows clinics in Malawi to send me images of wounds so I can recommend treatment options and monitor the patients throughout the year.



Jennifer Wall and Oliver at home, which doubles as her foundation's HQ.

What are your ultimate goals for the foundation?

I want to get the burn treatment program at the hospital in Nkhoma to the point where it is autonomous and can serve as a model that we implement in other hospitals in Malawi, expanding our reach to millions of Africans.

What can Coronado residents do to help?

Spread the story, make a donation, attend a fund-raiser. Our next fund-raiser will focus on local artisans, especially from Coronado. I am looking for artisans to trade work for African cloth or traditional carvings. I can then auction off the artisan's work to raise funds. This year, we are launching an elementary school burn prevention program and are translating children's books that teach burn safety into the native Chichewa language. To learn more, visit www.africaburnrelief.org.