

Half a world away

Abbott volunteers help out in Malawi

As a company, Abbott works through its Global Care Initiatives to improve access to HIV/AIDS care in the developing world. But four employees at Abbott Canada felt the need to get involved on a much more personal level. So what did they do? They volunteered with an AIDS service organization (ASO) in Malawi.

Dianne Stephens, Matthew Steele, Tiffany Stone and Michael Gregson didn't know each other well when they boarded the plane to Malawi in July 2006. What they shared was a burning desire to see what HIV/AIDS in Africa looked like and find a way to be helpful. None had ever worked in development and only one of the four had previously been to Africa.

Their desire might have remained just that, but Director of Governmental Affairs at Abbott Canada, Mr. Laurie Dotto, helped the four find an organization that could get them to Africa and put them to work. He contacted the Montreal office of Uniterra, an affiliate of the World University Services of Canada (WUSC) created specifically for short-term volunteer assignments. While employees used their vacation time for the trip, Abbott contributed 57% of the cost.

Uniterra identified an ASO in Malawi that could use four short-term volunteers. "If we were going to Africa by ourselves, we wouldn't really know where to start," says Steele.



HIV/AIDS IN MALAWI	
Prevalence of HIV/AIDS among 15 to 49 year olds	14.2%
Number of HIV positive adults	810,000
Number of deaths from AIDS since 1985	300,000
Life expectancy at birth in 2003	38 years
Proportion of women at prenatal clinics who are HIV positive	One third
Number of new orphans created by AIDS every year	70,000

SOURCE: UNITERRA

"Uniterra takes your credentials, interviews you, and connects you with a relevant project in the country decided on. For us that was Malawi." The ASO they worked with was CAPLWHA (Caring for People Living with HIV/AIDS), in the town of Bangwe just outside Blantyre. CAPLWHA was established in July 2003 and

has about 15 regular volunteers committed to prevention and awareness of HIV/AIDS and support for people living with AIDS.

"We would meet at the centre each morning and head off on patient visits," says Stephens. The roads were very bad so much of the journey was made on foot.



Volunteers from Abbott Canada at the CAPLWHA centre in Bangwe, Malawi.

"We'd arrive at a little hut perched on top of a hill, where several children lived and dad or mom or both were HIV positive. If dad was HIV positive, we'd emphasize that for mom to stay healthy and be able to look after the family, she needs to know if she's positive, because she could get onto a waiting list for treatment." HIV/AIDS is, of course, only part of the problem. "People don't have adequate water and food," says Stephens. "Many of the people we met had no idea when they would eat next."

The Canadians also participated in CAPLWHA's education efforts in the schools, which focused on responsibility for family and community. "There has to be a global effort to act as a community and make sure people stay together as families, look after each other and look after their children," says Steele. He describes how women bear the brunt of a lot of the problems. "They have to look after the children and if they get sick and get tested and turn out to be positive, their husbands generally leave. The social structures really let the women down."

Some of the volunteers who work at CAPLWHA are not much better off than the people they visit. One of the volunteers,

named Anisha, lost both parents to AIDS, is herself HIV positive and must provide for an older sister paralyzed with spinal tuberculosis and three younger siblings. She's 12.

There's only so much you can do in a few weeks, but the visit was helpful to CAPLWHA. Having Western visitors gave the group more clout. "We were told that our presence opened the door for the organizer to gain access to the chiefs," says Steele. And people were happy to talk with the Canadians. "To them, we represent resources, Steele observes. The message we took home from all the leadership was Don't forget us. You see what we need: water, infrastructure, help."

CAPLWHA
CARING FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS

SERVICES OFFERED
- COUNSELLING ON HIV/AIDS
- GROUP THERAPY
- VIDEO SHOW ON HIV/AIDS
- HOME BASED CARE (HBC)

WORKING HOURS
8:00am - 4:30pm
Mon - Fri

P.O. Box 90250,
Bangwe,
Blantyre 9,
Malawi
Cell: 08508 878
E-mail: caplwaha@yahoo.co.uk

If you would like to make a contribution to CAPLWHA's important work in Malawi, contact Matthew Steele at Matthew.Steele@Abbott.com