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Community Outreach

By Becky Breining

Dr. Craig Hobar

WINNER
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MEDICAL CENTER - Dr. Craig Hobar, head of pediatric plastic and craniofacial surgery at Children's Medical Center of Dallas, started something big nine years ago.

He founded the Life Enhancement Association for People, also known as LEAP.

No ordinary outreach service, the organization of medical professionals helps people in under-developed countries who have tragic facial deformities. LEAP's impact on individual lives has been immeasurable. It has become a significant ambassador of America's abundance and good will.

"LEAP started with myself and two nurses packing supplies from the hospital in my back house," said Hobar. That was 1991. Since then, LEAP has performed more than 25 mission trips to the Dominican Republic and Belize, operating on more than 1,000 children, and adults who live in poverty. This year his team of surgeons, anesthesiologists and nurses will visit Laos for the first time.

Hobar said patients are joyous when they arrive, "looking like we may be the answers to their prayers." The medical team performs its work for free.

The team performs many types of reconstructive surgery, correcting deformities that make children outcasts in their communities. Correction of cleft lip and palate is the most common, which often restores their ability to breathe, eat and speak in a more normal manner.

"When you take a baby born with a deforming cleft and fix it," he says, "and hand that baby back to its mother and see the tears of joy, and know how that baby's life will likely be dramatically changed for the better, it is a very small world. And that baby, no matter what color it is, or what language it will speak, is your closest neighbor. That's what charity is all about to me - those with means and advantages helping those without."

It's a considerable challenge in a third-world country, where the doctors and nurses spend days, unpacking medical supplies, setting up temporary hospitals and sterilizing equipment. The operating environment is usually nothing more than a room with beds, sinks, water and electricity - utilities that inexplicably can stop at any moment.

In addition, every Saturday for two months before a trip, LEAP volunteers work in a warehouse sorting and boxing supplies, in preparation for their host-country's customs check. Children's Medical Center donates many of the supplies and lends many pieces of surgical equipment.

To make the most of their trip, the volunteers work 16-hour days to see as many patients as possible. LEAP has not had one mortality in its nine years of work.

'That brave girl'

Among dozens of poignant stories LEAP has seen unfold, Burns tells one about Ana Maria, an 18-year-old in the Dominican Republic who first came to the surgeons when she was 10. She had a huge tumor growing out of the right side of her face, a condition known as neurofibromatosis. Her father had worked extra jobs to afford the long bus ride to see the doctors.

"We were devastated when we had to tell her that the operation simply could not be done because of complexity and safety issues," said Burns.

Nonetheless, Ana Maria and her father came back every year, hoping there would be better news. Finally, eight years later, "everything came together," he said. Through the generosity of American Airlines, Save the Children and Baylor Hospital, Ana Maria traveled to Dallas for reconstructive surgery.

Hobar assembled a team of the most qualified doctors and nurses to perform the 13-hour surgery, which, involved peeling the tumor from Ana Maria's brain and reconstructing the right side of her face."

"That brave girl, who lived in a house without electricity with her parents and seven other children, got on an airplane for the first time in her life, by herself, and traveled to a foreign country to trust her life to doctors she barely knew," he said.

Ana Maria has recovered from the surgery and never misses a visit to the doctors when they return to the Dominican Republic. They have witnessed a

dramatic transformation in her personality.

And when Hobar and his colleagues return to their work in the United States, they are enriched with a new-found respect for each other and their own lives, he said, never losing sight of the fact that "we are in a country that is incredibly blessed and prosperous."

Breining is a freelance writer in Dallas.

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