

## **Working for the Weakened:**

### **Renu Weiss, M.D. Cares for the Impoverished of India**

On April 28, 2009, Renu Weiss, M.D. (Class of 2000), returned to the UT Health Science Center campus to present “Working for the Weakened” to School of Medicine students, faculty, staff, and friends. The presentation highlighted Dr. Weiss’ work with The Banyan, a clinic in Chennai, India, that provides shelter, medical care, and rehabilitation services to mentally ill women rescued from the streets. Currently serving as an internist and medical director of the clinic, Dr. Weiss travels to the United States once a year to increase awareness of the medical needs of the poor as well as to raise funding for The Banyan.

The Alumni Relations Office visited with Dr. Weiss to discuss her medical school experience and subsequent work caring for the impoverished of India.

**Alumni Relations:** Was there a seminal event or person in your life that made you want to become a doctor?

**Dr. Weiss:** My parents were the inspiration. My father once explained to me that the reason an impoverished young child (brought to him for treatment) had diarrhea when he had a cold was because he could not spit out the phlegm and had to perforce swallow it, resulting in diarrhea. I thought this explanation was scientific and magnificent; what a wonder the human body was, how cool it would be to study it further. As a young adult working in the computer field, I came to see that the human body was built like a very sophisticated computer and decided to study more about it.

**Alumni Relations:** Why did you decide to go to the School of Medicine at the UT Health Science Center in San Antonio?

**Dr. Weiss:** I was laid off from my job with a NASA contractor in Houston and started taking pre-med courses. After I took the MCAT and was invited to interview at UTHSCSA, I

discovered that this was a school for non-traditional students, or “bent arrows.” I enjoyed this aspect of the school very much, and ranked it #1 on my list of medical schools.

**Alumni Relations:** What is your favorite memory from your four years of medical school at UTHSCSA?

**Dr. Weiss:** There are many, but the one that stands out was when Dr. Linda Johnson asked me on practically the first day of Gross Anatomy lab if my husband had found a job. I had mentioned at an orientation event, when each of us had to stand up and introduce ourselves, that my husband and children were in Houston while I was in San Antonio, and that he was actively job-hunting in San Antonio. I was very impressed that Dr. Johnson remembered this; it showed me clearly that the professors at San Antonio were a breed apart.

**Alumni Relations:** Which medical school professors made the greatest impact on you?

**Dr. Weiss:** There are so many: Linda Johnson, Richard Luduena, Barbara Sanford, Virginia Thomas, Greg Freeman, Scott Johnson, Rajam Ramamurthy, Andy Diehl, Carlos Pestana, Kozue Shibazaki, Ray Faber, Craig Witz, Fred Richards, Debra Morrow, Tom King, Leonard Lawrence, Nan Clare. Why do they hold such special places in my heart? Because they demonstrated time and again that they would go the extra mile to ensure that I got the training and support I needed.

**Alumni Relations:** What is the most important skill or lesson you learned as a medical student at UTHSCSA?

**Dr. Weiss:** To listen. And to treat everyone equally: rich or poor, Spanish-speaking or Tamil-speaking, gay or heterosexual, etc.

**Alumni Relations:** What gives you the greatest satisfaction in working at The Banyan?

**Dr. Weiss:** The chance to heal someone to whom life has dealt a difficult hand. The greatest joy in working here is that poor people in India do not know that they do not have very much, and they are extremely cheerful and resilient. People smile a lot here, and are generally grateful for whatever little I can do for them. The benefits of being around happy, grateful people are thunderous. I contrast this quite routinely with the United States, where people have quite a bit more and, without fail, complain.

**Alumni Relations:** What are the greatest challenges you currently face in your work?

**Dr. Weiss:** Lack of money is always a barrier, as my patients cannot afford expensive tests and medication, and The Banyan cannot reach out to touch the millions who need the help. The difficulty in ordering a post-mortem here continues to make my clinical life challenging. But we have a never-say-die attitude, and a mantra to “Do what we can with what we have.”

**Alumni Relations:** What advice would you give to medical students considering their possible medical career paths?

**Dr. Weiss:** Do what you love, and appreciate all those who support you in that endeavor.

**Note:** Dr. Weiss was born in Virajpet, India, and grew up in Madurai. At the age of 19, she came to the United States for her graduate education. After earning her medical degree from UTHSCSA’s School of Medicine, she completed her internal medicine residency at St. Vincent Hospital in Indianapolis. She currently lives with her husband and two sons in Chennai. In 2009, Dr. Weiss received the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Award #1, given by The Rosenthal Family Foundation for recent innovative work making a notable contribution to improve clinical care in internal medicine.