

Alumni Gifts Help Fund Student Trip to Care for Mentally Ill Patients in India

In December, four second-year medical students traveled to Chennai, India, to work side-by-side with Dr. Renu Weiss '90 at The Banyan, a clinic dedicated to providing basic healthcare services to mentally ill women. The two-week trip, made possible in part by a \$5,000 gift from the Alumni Association's Student Education Enhancement Fund, exemplified the unlimited potential of bringing students and alumni together to make lives better in San Antonio, throughout South Texas, and around the world.

The students' primary task was to perform complete physical exams for as many of the The Banyan's patients as possible. Their efforts included taking vitals, checking for lice, listening to heart and lung sounds, and performing peripheral vasculature exams, abdominal exams, breast exams, and superficial pelvic exams to check for uterine prolapse.

"The physical exams performed by the students were a boon to us, since we do not always have time to examine all our patients as thoroughly as we would like," Weiss said. "They worked in teams of two and found all manner of pathology. But just as importantly, they listened, they pacified, they laughed, and they shared."

Because all of the patients at The Banyan suffer from some kind of mental health disorder, the four students were exposed to a broad range of mood and psychotic disorders. "We also saw a wide variety of general medical conditions—from lice to possible thyroid disorders," said Navuluri. "Some of the most memorable ones were two cases of uterine prolapse, a case of Turner's syndrome, a handful of worrisome breast lumps, a case of anasarca, and various dermatological conditions and fungal infections." The students also saw a number of congenital and acquired deformities. One woman's legs were badly burned and the skin had fused together,

preventing her from being able to stand upright. While the students were not able to treat the women with these deformities, these cases gave the students insights into the difficult lives the patients have led.

One of the lasting medical lessons the students learned from the experience was how to do a lot with a little. “Throughout our education in San Antonio, we have enjoyed access to everything we could possibly need,” observed Goode. “Whether it is medical equipment, knowledge, or support, we know where to find it. At The Banyan, we conducted physical exams with plastic chairs and one exam table. Electricity and running water were not guaranteed, but we learned to do the very best we could with what we had. We were able to get out of our comfort zones and use our brains, our eyes, our ears, and our hands, which are really our most valuable tools.”

The spirit and resilience of the staff and patients at The Banyan made a similarly strong impression on Lisa Sawyer. “The biggest surprise on the trip for me was seeing how people function—and function well—with so little,” she noted. “I’m not naïve or presumptuous enough to say that everyone we encountered was happy or coping well with poverty, but there was a general happiness and quality of life that I had not expected among such an impoverished and mentally ill population. I was also struck by the hospitality of the Indian people, as it far exceeded what we see in the United States. Almost everywhere we went, we were offered gifts, food, or tea. Even at The Banyan, the women were constantly making sure we had eaten!”

Amid the busy schedule of seeing patients, Weiss and the four students found time to unwind and celebrate. They spent New Year’s Eve at a local venue that hosts an annual celebration. The students wore Country Western clothes, urged by Weiss, and they danced, ate, and mingled with the local residents. On the ensuing day—the final day of the medical mission

trip—an entertainment program had been arranged. “Neelima, Lisa, Caroline, and Andrea did a Texas line dance, replete with jeans and cowboy boots, and it was a big hit,” recalled Weiss. Toward the end of the program, many among the assembled crowd climbed onto the stage to join in the dancing.

“I was very impressed with how easily Neelima, Lisa, Caroline, and Andrea mingled with our mentally ill, destitute residents and the remarkable staff taking care of them,” Weiss said. “I was also pleased with the students’ acceptance and enjoyment of Indian culture. They are bright, motivated, fiery, compassionate, intelligent, tolerant, and helpful... everything I would expect in students from the Health Science Center in San Antonio!”

Overall, the trip had a profound impact on the students’ fundamental understanding of what it means to be a physician. “Above all, our Banyan experience brought to light what an honor it is for us to be entrusted to care for some of society’s most vulnerable members,” Camosy said. “The patients we saw have no means by which to care for themselves; they are the downtrodden, the mentally ill, and in need of others to advocate on their behalf. As physicians, we will have the privilege, and the responsibility, of advocating for our patients’ well-being. In India, we experienced the extreme of what it means to do this. Some of the patients we will care for in our future practices will be homeless, some will not be. Some will have mental illness, some will not. All, however, will be in the vulnerable position of placing their health in our hands. We must use our medical skills and our compassion to live up to this responsibility and provide the care they need.”

Editor’s Note: Dr. Renu Weiss ’90, Neelima Navuluri ’14, Andrea Goode ’14, Caroline Camosy ’14, and Lisa Sawyer ’14 contributed to this article. A longer version of this story will be

featured in an upcoming issue of *FUTURE* magazine. For more information on the Student Education Enhancement Fund, go to www.SAMedAlum.com and follow the Invested link. For more information on The Banyan, including their funding needs, please visit: www.thebanyan.org.



Caroline, Lisa, Andrea, and Neelima at San Thome Cathedral on Christmas Day 2011.



Neelima listening to the heart of a patient at The Banyan



Caroline and Andrea examining a patient.