



Benin, West Africa: providing hope to a country overlooked

– WRITTEN BY CARRIE FORAN, RN, BSN



NURSING IS AN INCREDIBLY REWARDING CAREER AND, IN MY OPINION, A CALLING. *It requires selflessness, responsibility, integrity and so much more. As healthcare workers, we have the gift and ability to impact people during times when they feel as though their world is falling apart.*

After receiving my nursing degree from Baylor University, I made a promise to take my nursing skills overseas at least once a year to treat the less fortunate. Only six months into my career I traveled to Manaus, Brazil to provide healthcare in the small, remote villages of the Amazon. I quickly learned how to become resourceful with what little supplies we had.

However, all my learning was put to the test when I traveled to Benin, West Africa in April 2007. It

didn't take long to realize that this was a country often overlooked by the rest of the world.

Benin has approximately 7.4 million poverty-stricken and deprived people. Nestled between two warring countries, Nigeria and Togo, Benin is home to faithful followers of the voodoo religion and the slave trade of centuries ago. The average lifespan for the people of Benin is only 47 to 53 years.

Each day our team of twelve traveled over an hour to a remote clinic built by the United Nations. This small cement building with no running water or electricity is the only treatment center available for 75 miles, where the nearest "zone hospital" can be found. The clinic is open 24/7 and is operated by just a few dedicated nurses and physicians.



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On the first day, as we clumsily exited our tiny bus, I heard a young boy's voice call out, "Bonjour! Bonjour!" I replied, "Good morning! Good morning!" All day we communicated with smiles on our faces, speaking only those words. We treated just over 100 people, but little did we know what impact we would have in the days to come. News of the "yovos" (a native word used to describe Caucasians) coming to town spread like wildfire throughout the local communities.

As our little red bus pulled up on the second day, over 600 people waited to see the yovos. They saw us as their only source of hope. Amazed and a bit overwhelmed, we resolved to do our best with what little resources we had, trusting that God would do the rest. By the end of the five days we had treated 1,069 patients - a miracle indeed!

The most common cases we saw included malnourishment, anemia, parasites, wound infections, malaria, yellow fever, STD's and HIV/AIDS. We also saw a variety of rare (to the western world) illnesses including elephantiasis, leprosy and tropical eye diseases, among many others.

Unfortunately, lack of medical attention has taken an astonishing amount of lives in Benin, continuously stripping away the hope of the African people. But for the short time that we were there, we fought to save those lives and restore hope.

During our stay, we also traveled to an orphanage in the town of Cotonou. We were able to provide more than a month's supply of daily vitamins, worm medication, Children's Tylenol and toiletries, along with coloring books and crayons, to 31 grateful children. I have never seen more joyful faces, and I felt honored to be able to spend time caring for them.

I left Benin burdened by the despair of the people and humbled by the way they live. Yet, I did not realize just how rewarding my career would be until my trip to West Africa. The people of Benin have changed my life, and I plan to return to once again provide the hope of good health.

Carrie Foran joined Medical City 18 months ago and is an RN in the CVICU. ❖



OPPOSITE PAGE: (clockwise from far left) The clinic's sparse supply room; two children patiently await treatment.

THIS PAGE: (clockwise from top) Hundreds gather in front of the small clinic in Benin; children eat dinner at a Cotonou orphanage; Carrie Foran cradles a sleeping child.