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When help arrives

By Kathleen (Greif) Berken '71



Drs. Carol (Ehlinger) '77 and Tom Ritter '78

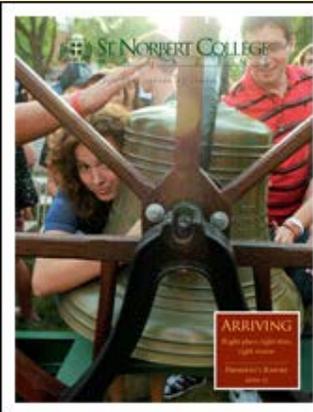
If you want to help an area struck by disaster, then have a practical skill to offer and be ready to be self-sufficient. It's sound advice from an obstetrician and dentist whose vacations the past eight years have found them delivering babies and practicing oral surgery in Haiti, Sri Lanka, Bosnia, Honduras and New Orleans.

Drs. Carol (Ehlinger) '77 and Tom Ritter '78 set up clinics, create medical team networks, raise money and try to foster lasting relationships with the people they serve. Their humanitarian aid trips last from a weekend to three weeks. Tom explains, "It's a vacation for us to practice what we love to do without the barriers we face delivering healthcare in the States."

The couple met at St. Norbert when they were each other's lab instructors in chemistry and microbiology. Married in 1984, they moved to Baltimore for Carol's residency at Johns Hopkins and Greater Baltimore Medical Center, where she is the director of minimally invasive surgery. Tom established a dental practice and the couple settled down to raise three children.

The Ritters undertook their first medical missions in 2004, when a team working in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch needed an obstetrician and a dentist to help.

 **Web Extra**
Follow **Tom and Carol Ritters'** blog. [>>MORE](#)



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 **SNC Day**
It's our annual fall open house, and a chance to share our cherished tradition of radical hospitality.

 **Getting in the game**
Photographer Evan Siegle says that shooting sports is about preparation, timing – and a little good luck.

 **Somewhere in time**
A forgotten time capsule, rediscovered, reveals what was top-of-mind at St. Norbert College half a century ago.

 **A warm welcome**
Tour the new building that is transforming the arrival experience for our visitors.

 **The move-in**
Join **Haley Bass '15** on her very first day of college, as the first-year and her family set up her room in Madelaine/Lorraine.

 **Teach me your ways**
Retired educator the **Rev. Gery Meehan, O.Praem., '57** remembers **Abbot Bernard**

Carol's journey to assist in relief efforts in Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami pulled her away from the filming of "If the Bough Breaks," the documentary the Ritters produced to educate the public on the rising costs of liability insurance – costs that are driving medical professionals away from their field.

The Ritter's primary focus has been Haiti, since well before the 2012 earthquake hit. They have made some 20 humanitarian aid trips there since Carol's parents first connected with the country, through the Rev. Larry Canavera's Friends of Haiti group at St. Philip's Church, Green Bay. "We connected with the country, through the Rev. Larry Canavera's Friends of Haiti group at St. Philip's Church, Green Bay. We went to Haiti because of my parents' relationship with Father Larry and the church," Carol says. "It's been a love affair ever since."

Besides helping to improve the Haitian dental school, Tom acts as a logistician who networks with medical teams, coordinates the flow of dental supplies, teaches and follows the care of patients. "We try not to be medical tourists," Carol says. "We go back to the villages to follow up and monitor our treatment outcomes."

Carol coordinates with local doctors in Haiti, does Pap smears for hundreds of Haitian women and takes the specimens back to Baltimore for analysis, returning to operate on the abnormal results. "There is an epidemic of aggressive cervical cancer in Haiti," Carol says. Life expectancy for Haitian women is 45 and dropping. "We are trying to provide access for early detection since prevention with the HPV vaccine [alone] is unimaginable. We need to educate people so they can be active participants in their healthcare."

Critical is finding local women to relay information to other women. "I try to be a voice for the voiceless – to help women empower each other," Carol says.

Carol's joy is delivering babies, because she gets to be the first person to touch the new arrivals. "This is all so much bigger than myself," she says. Tom agrees: "You can wake up each day knowing that you can make a difference." Sometimes that requires all one's knowledge and skill. Other times, it's simple: fixing a patient's wheelchair, replacing inefficient cooking devices, introducing sterilization techniques.

Vital to the Ritters' work is listening, paying attention, networking and "doing the right work for the right reasons to make the right changes." It can be difficult not to overpromise what you can accomplish in Haiti or take on too many projects, they say.

After a disaster, medical aid workers often suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Arriving three days after the 2010 earthquake, teams had to use Civil War methods to care for trauma victims and perform surgery in makeshift hospitals, using whatever was brought in their suitcases. Returning home can sometimes be the most difficult part. "People ask, 'How was Haiti?' but they really don't want to hear the long answer," says Tom.

However, the Ritters' days at St. Norbert planted hopeful seeds. Grateful for the selfless service of the Norbertines, the Ritters are also guided by it. As Tom says: "So after you've developed a profession, expanded your mind, found God, attained bliss, found your passion ... what do you do the next day? To us, the answer seems universal across all religious and spiritual traditions: Give back. Serve others selflessly."

Their next trip to Haiti will be in February 2012.

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