

Nurse Extends Helping Hand Across the World

BY DANIEL CASCIATO

Humanitarian nurse Mary Lightfine always wanted to live and work in other countries, helping the less fortunate—thanks to Tarzan. As a little girl, Lightfine was mesmerized watching the jungle hero swinging across her black-and-white television set.

“He planted a seed of curiosity in my brain that grew,” she said. “I remember the first time I saw him speaking fluent Swahili to the natives with their painted faces and feathers in their hair. I was amazed there were people like that out there and I wanted to go live in a tree with Tarzan and experience these people. That feeling never went away.”

That memory, coupled with her experience as an emergency room nurse in low-income hospitals throughout the country, convinced Lightfine to pursue her passion.

“I met many patients who weren’t thankful for the care we gave them,” she said. “They would kick and spit on us, and call us every bad word you could think of. I could count on one hand the number of people in five years who said thank you.”

After moving to Los Angeles to work at L.A. Children’s Hospital, Lightfine’s attitude changed.

“We treated Mexican immigrants who were so thankful for the care they received,” she said. “Parents would stay to help us suture their children and listen to our



Mary Lightfine

instructions. They were kind, caring and always returned for their follow-up. I said to myself that I should work in another country if I wanted to feel appreciated.”

In February 1992, after sixteen years as an ER nurse, Lightfine moved to Mogadishu, Somalia, where she quickly discovered that life didn’t

imitate art. “It was a total culture shock,” she said. “It was nothing like the Tarzan movies. I knew that it was a war zone but I didn’t expect war to be as scary as it was and didn’t realize I would be so at risk.”

Lightfine and the people who accompanied her lived in a compound behind 12-foot walls, surrounded by barbed wire. When they rode in a vehicle to and from the hospital, an armed guard sat perched on top of the roof with an AK-47, ready to defend them.

“At first, I was petrified,” she said. “We were basically prisoners in our compound. Eventually, we got immune to the violence and it didn’t seem so frightening after several months.”

In addition to Somalia, Lightfine has lived and worked in over 76 countries. During the past 12 years, she delivered babies in Sri Lanka, brought food to remote villages by helicopter in Nicaragua and to starving refugees in South Sudan, and was one of the first to provide medical aid to Kosovar refugees.

Lightfine details her experiences in her book, *Nurses, Nomads and Warlords*. Her experiences also inspired her to start Nurse Without Boundaries, her own lecture and writing-based organization, and Volunteers Without Boundaries.

“The purpose of my lectures is to demonstrate through stories how one person can make a difference and the power of caring,” she said. “Volunteers Without Boundaries came about because every time I lectured at colleges, students approached me about wanting to volunteer. Many organizations didn’t accept students. I founded this group so students had an avenue to follow if they wanted to volunteer.”

One volunteer she’s inspired is her husband of two years, Paul Rooy.

“We’re both pilots so we fly medical supplies, veterinary supplies, and educational training supplies to various countries,” said Lightfine. “We travel to about 10 different countries every year. We returned recently from Africa where we were working with a rural community in Uganda to improve water availability, sanitation and health. We’re still collaborating with them and will return.”

Lightfine still has more goals she’d like to accomplish.



Lightfine on an emergency run in Chiapas, Mexico.

“In addition to what I’m already doing in Africa, I hope to do something more creative with marketing and computer skills,” she said. “I’d like to teach people how to market their ideas or sell their handmade items online.”

Another goal of hers is to try to find healthcare for Americans.

“This is a big passion of mine,” she said. “Our healthcare system needs revamping. I’m gathering as much information as I can on healthcare issues to see what we can do.”

Although it seems like a daunting task, no task is insurmountable for Lightfine.

“Everyone does a job where they earn certain rewards,” she said. “For me, knowing that I made a difference in someone’s life is my reward. Knowing I can help make this world a better place keeps me going.”

For more information on Mary Lightfine, visit her Web site at www.marylighfine.com.

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