FATHER AND SON JOIN FORCES IN HAITI—June 2010

By Felicia M. Koretsky

Unless you count that time some years ago when father and son got caught in a storm on their 26-foot boat in Bimini, outings together have been pretty routine—fishing, basketball games, tennis tournaments.

For Miami Lakes pediatrician, Carlos Tellechea, M.D., embarking alone on a week-long medical rotation to Haiti left him feeling, well,-- anxious and scared. That is, until a colleague gave him an idea that would change his outlook.

"Bring a helper," suggested Susan Leitner, M.D., recalling how her recent mission to Port-au-Prince would have been better if she had brought a companion.

The perfect candidate: Son, Carlos Miguel, he thought. Surely, the third year medical student at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, his alma mater, would jump at the chance to spend a week with him in Haiti.

"Actually, I turned him down," said Carlos Miguel, who for months has been preparing for a 350 question board exam coming up later this month. "I was very reluctant to go. My biggest priority was this test. But after I mulled it over for a couple of days, I said to myself *I have to do this*. This is going to be more of learning experience than just studying pages in a book."

A week later, father and son were on a 90-minute flight from Miami to Port-au-Prince, nerves shot, minds racing. Father was worried that at 56, his body wasn't up to the stress and physical demands of long days and poor conditions. At 24, son was worried that he wasn't qualified to give medical help to trauma victims.

But shortly after their arrival to Port-au-Prince, all of their reservations, fears and concerns vanished. The primary care doctor and the ambitious medical student became a father and son medical team.

Carlos Miguel started his day at 5 a.m. taking on nursing duties, while his father made rounds in the pediatric ward.

The two united later in the morning at "The Mango Clinic," a triage area in front of the hospital that got its name because it is set up under a large tree brimming with green mangos.

"You just move patients in and out. There is no documentation. No notes. The kids undress right there, you give them medicines if you have them, but if not, you just tell them what they need to buy. If there is anything more serious, you send them into the hospital," said Dr. Tellechea, who with wife Conchi, also have two daughters, Maria, a freelance producer in Los Angeles and Laura, a first year medical student in Puerto Rico.

"We treated everyone with abdominal pain for parasites. It was a general remedy because in a sense we were treating everyone blindly. We had no real tools, no medical history, it was just us, a table filled with a variety of medications and a translator."

The two spent the afternoons separately in the crowded hospital tent--treating patients with Illnesses running the gamut from severe wounds and broken bones to scabies and appendicitis. Some children underwent daily anesthesia so that doctors could properly clean their wounds, left deep and untreated since the January earthquake.

Lack of education on the island meant many parents were unaware of their children's illnesses. One parent thought his child had a major brain injury when all it turned out to be was severe congestion from a cold. Lack of emotion was also common place. One girl, about 7 years of age, they recalled, seemed unmoved after her right arm was amputated, going along with her day as if she always only had one arm.

"These people have lost everything," said the pediatrician, who recalled how multiple family members would huddle tightly together to share single hospital cots. "They just have nothing else to lose. They just had no emotion."

This once in a lifetime shared experience triggered each of them to see each other in a different light. The son, who has grown up watching his father care for patients in his practice and as the head of their tightly-knit Cuban family, now appreciated his father for his life experience.

"For the first time, I saw my father as a *teacher*," said Carlos Miguel, who is planning on going into emergency medicine. "I learned so much from him. I'd ask him questions and he'd answer me, teach me, respected my opinion."

As a father of three, Dr. Tellechea now saw his youngest child and only son, as a grown man- thoughtful, resourceful, smart and well-liked.

"That's what made me most proud," he said of his son who gained particular notororiety among the medical staff, short on supplies, when he crafted a makeshift measuring board out of scrap wood and duct tape. "The other doctors in our group did not look at my son as this annoying medical student tagging along with his father, they wanted to see him succeed, they enjoyed his company. They saw that he was competent and bright."

The two both speak softly about the lives with unknown futures they left behind. But they both smile at the rewarding experience and time they shared, especially at the end each

long day, when they caught the nightly shuttle over to a pub set up in a tent a mile away by the United Nations, for food and drinks.

“That was our refuge,” said Dr. Tellechea. “We’d go there to relax and escape the chaos and crowded conditions of the hospital. We’d talk about the day, have something to eat. We looked so forward to a cold drink. During the day you’d drink anything just to keep yourself hydrated, but it was awful. You can’t imagine the taste of a cold drink after a day spent in miserably hot conditions. It was just enough to get us recharged to face the next day.”

Now, three weeks later, back in the comforts of their daily regime, feeling removed from the misery, desperation, heat, thirst and overwhelming disrepair that is now Haiti, the two look back on what they’ve come away with. The two feel more connected than ever, but differ in their thoughts for the future. For son, the trip confirmed his choice to pursue emergency medicine, but father is left pondering his effectiveness as a medical professional in private practice.

“Before I went, I thought it would be a gift to go. It’s somewhat of a responsibility we have --to help—to do more,” said Tellechea. “Then after you return, you come back to your practice and see parents worried about trivial things, a pimple, an earache. It makes me think about how useful I am really being here and am I doing enough. I ask myself ‘Whose responsibility is it to care for these people. What is our responsibility as humans to help these other humans?

“I think I’ve returned asking myself more questions than I was able to answer,” he said.

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