

# HEALTHY BODY



“Providing service to others feeds me,” says Boulder, CO, acupuncturist Mindi Counts, here with some patients on a 2014 trip to New Delhi, India.

## Your Doctor, Our Hero

Unpaid, using their precious vacation, everyday docs like yours work miracles in the poorest reaches of the globe. They come home with full hearts and extraordinary stories like these.

BY STEPHANIE BOOTH

IF YOUR LOCAL CLINIC OR DOCTOR'S PRACTICE shuts down for a couple of weeks this summer, don't assume your M.D. is enjoying his time-share or perfecting her golf swing. Thousands of care providers across the country, from plastic surgeons to acupuncturists, give up their vacation to fly to some of the world's neediest places to donate their skills. Typically, the trips don't pay; in fact, the doctors often foot their own costs. Days are long, and medical supplies—even basics like running water or electricity—can be lacking. But the docs come home with hope, energy, and purpose renewed. “It reminds you of why you got into the business of helping others in the first place,” says Charlotte, NC, dermatologist Peggy Fuller, M.D., veteran of a half-dozen such missions. Meet her and five other remarkable volunteers, and the next time you're in for a checkup, ask your M.D.: What did you do on your summer vacation?



**“I HELP TAKE AWAY THE HURT.”**

**Mindi K. Counts, L.Ac.**

31, Boulder, CO  
Licensed acupuncturist

PATIENTS AT HARDCRABBLE clinics around the world don't always know what to make of Mindi Counts. As an acupuncturist, she uses hair-thin needles to prod the body's nerve centers, easing symptoms like aches and nausea. "I see people thinking, *Who's this woman that wants to put needles in me?*" Counts says. "But days later, they'll come back with a translator, wanting me to know that their pain has gone away. That's gratifying." Over the years, she's treated traumatized Tibetan refugees in Nepal, women in the poorest neighborhoods in New Delhi, and rural Burmese women enduring the pain of labor at the Thai border. (There, she re-started one mom-to-be's stalled child-birth.) Raising thousands of dollars for each trip is challenging, and Counts worries about leaving her busy practice for months at a time. "But once you see this suffering," she says, "you can't live your life the same way. I have to do this."

**Help her cause:** Counts's own charity, the Inner Ocean Empowerment Project, accepts donations through Acupuncturists Without Borders ([acuwithoutborders.org](http://acuwithoutborders.org)).

**“On a medical mission, treating a respiratory infection and handing out kids' vitamins feel equally rewarding,” says Ramirez. “You're there to do whatever is needed.”**



**“Volunteering feels like I've come full circle.”**

**Claudia Ramirez, M.D.**, 35, Richmond, VA  
Rehabilitation physician

GROWING UP IN EL SALVADOR, Claudia Ramirez didn't always have access to electricity or running water. Her mother wanted better for her and brought 8-year-old Claudia to the U.S., then worked cleaning houses to support them. "I never thought someone like me could be a doctor," admits Ramirez. "But my mom pushed me and encouraged me to dream big." She became the first person in her family to graduate from college in this new country, then went on to medical school and eventually a job as a rehabilitation physician—a nerve, muscle, and bone expert who treats injuries or illnesses that affect movement—at the University of Rochester Medical Center.

Even while she was still in school, Ramirez began going back to Latin America on medical missions, taking her skills everywhere from the lowlands of Honduras to rural areas in the Dominican Republic. "As soon as you start talking with one patient, they want to bring in the rest of their family," she says. She's more than happy to see every single one. "I went from being this little girl in a struggling country to someone who has 'M.D.' after her name," Ramirez says. "It's a gift, and this is one of the ways that I can repay it."

**Help her cause:** Cure International ([cure.org](http://cure.org)) accepts donations in many forms. Have an unused gift card lying around? Donate it.

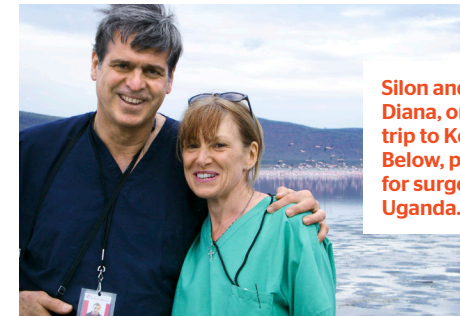
**Despite the high crime near this New Delhi clinic, dozens of women came out to see Counts.**



**“HERE, A DENTAL VISIT IS A LUXURY.”**

**Robert Silon, D.D.S.**

63, Rockville Centre, NY  
Dentist



**Silon and his wife, Diana, on a 2008 trip to Kenya. Below, prepping for surgery in Uganda.**

IMAGINE SITTING UNDER A TREE in an old seat ripped out of a car while a dentist pulls an infected tooth. The stuff of nightmares? Robert Silon's patients throughout Africa couldn't be more grateful. "Many have never seen a dentist or any health care practitioner before," he explains, "and all of them are in pain." Since 2008, Silon has been traveling to different countries on the continent at least once a year with HELP International, a charity that provides medical relief around the globe. During each trip, he provides much-needed dental care to patients ranging from toddlers to octogenarians, working until everyone who's been waiting has been seen. "When I leave, they might not have care for years," he says. On one trip, Silon had a 4-year-old patient whose baby teeth were riddled with decay; she'd been having trouble eating for months. He treated her infections, extracted the worst-off chompers, and set up a dental health plan with her parents. As he got ready to leave that day, he felt a small hand grab his. The girl smiled and said thank you, proudly telling Silon she'd eaten lunch without pain. "I rarely get emotional," he says, "but even now, that brings me to tears."

**Help his cause:** HELP International ([helpinternational.info](http://helpinternational.info)) provides aid and supplies (like second-hand medical equipment).







At the Mtindo Primary School in Mwanza, Tanzania, "all but two of these kids needed glasses and had never worn them," says Nasser. "They couldn't see beyond 5 inches."

**"I BRING CARE—AND A ROLE MODEL."**

**Moes Nasser, O.D.,** 59, Houston Optometrist



EVERY YEAR, MOES NASSER travels more than 30 hours from his Texas home to an isolated village in Tanzania. He's providing eye care, something desperately needed in a region with 2.8 million people but only 10 optometrists. Nasser knows what deprivation feels like—he grew up in the same village. "Our one-room school had no textbooks," he recalls. "We did math in the sand with a stick." At 20, Nasser won a scholarship that sent him to medical school in the U.S. He arrived with only \$20 in his pocket, and worked at gas stations to make ends meet. Today, he's a glaucoma specialist and an associate professor at the University of Houston. Last time he went back to Tanzania, he saw 1,100 patients and gave away 500 pairs of donated glasses. (One elderly woman broke into a happy jig after receiving hers.) He also carries a message to the town's children. "I tell them I was one of them," he says. "If I can become a doctor, so can they." **Help his cause:** Through Optometry Giving Sight ([givingsight.org](http://givingsight.org)), Nasser is raising money for a mobile eye clinic in Tanzania.

**"Changing a face can change a life."**

**Andrew Jacono, M.D.,** 44, New York City Plastic surgeon

IT WAS A THIRD-GRADE CLASSMATE with a cleft lip who inspired Andrew Jacono to become a doctor. "Before she had corrective surgery, no one would sit next to her on the bus," he recalls. "After, everyone wanted to. I wanted to help people that way." And over the years, he has: Largely through medical missions with the Help Us Give Smiles (HUGS) Foundation, he's operated on more than 500 children abroad who were suffering from facial deformities like cleft palates. "In the United States, most of these kids would get surgery and lead normal, happy, healthy lives," he says. "But in countries where even basic health care isn't guaranteed, it can mean being socially rejected. Treatment offers a fresh start." On a March trip to Quito, Ecuador, Jacono worked on kids born with microtia, a birth defect that causes abnormally developed ears. Afterward, a father thanked him. "He explained that he knew firsthand how life altering the operation can be: He'd been born with the same problem, and years ago another HUGS doctor had helped him," Jacono says. "I'm a dad myself. If I can do that just by giving up a few days, why wouldn't I?" **Help his cause:** You can donate time, cash, skills, or supplies to HUGS ([helpusgivesmiles.org](http://helpusgivesmiles.org)). In especially high demand: scrubs.



"I bring photos back, and my littlest daughter will ask, 'Did you fix that child's ear?'" says Jacono. "I can say I did."

IMAGES COURTESY OF SUBJECTS

"When I see suffering, I always think, *There but for the grace of God go I,*" says Fuller, here in Sri Lanka (center).



**"MY PAIN TURNED TO GOOD IN THE END."**

**Peggy Fuller, M.D.,** 50s, Charlotte, NC Dermatologist

WHEN PEGGY FULLER WAS COMPLETING her residency in internal medicine, her then toddler son had an accident that resulted in serious burns. His scars, thankfully, have healed, but Fuller was changed by what she saw during his hospitalization. "There were babies and little children who were severely burned, wrapped in bandages from head to toe," she remembers. "The sight was daunting. Their parents were very strong and quite courageous." Fuller was so moved by the experience that after becoming an internist, she did a second residency in dermatology. Today, she has a bustling one-woman Charlotte, NC, practice, handling both cosmetic and surgical work. But over the last 20 years, she's regularly shut her doors to take mission trips to places such as Sri Lanka, Brazil, Vietnam, and Honduras, where she's battled outbreaks of potentially fatal skin diseases, as well as educated health care workers about the effects of HIV/AIDS. "On these trips, I've seen infectious diseases that are usually only in textbooks," she says. "Taking my skills to people who need them just seems like the right thing to do." **Help her cause:** Resource Exchange International ([resourceexchangeinternational.com](http://resourceexchangeinternational.com)) provides medical care and trains local doctors in seven countries.