



## Danell DeBerg: A Profile of Compassion

One night while she was tending bar for her friend Edith at Saffron's, Danell DeBerg was presented with an opportunity that most people would have refused. Another friend, Bessie, explained that she was going to Haiti and she wanted Danell to join her. Bessie was going on a medical mission, and she knew that Danell had the background and the temperament that made her perfect for the trip. Danell took a chance and joined the trip, and her life has never been the same since.

For the past 5 years, Danell has been a part of New Frontiers Health Force, a group of non-denominational Christian medical missionaries. They are invited to visit areas to deliver primary healthcare in areas which are underserved, have no healthcare at all, or have been struck by natural disasters. In addition to that first trip to Haiti, her participation has taken her to Guatemala, India, into the Himalayas, Morocco, Mauritania, Honduras, Micronesia (after monsoons struck the region), and most recently to New Guinea. She takes at least 2 to 3 trips per year, each 2 weeks at a time, and is planning to add another in the coming year.

Originally from New Jersey, Danell graduated from the Worcester City Hospital School of Nursing. She later received her nursing degree from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Further down the road, after her parents retired to Ft. Myers, she came to Florida to attend law school at Stetson (where she graduated in 1982). Today, she puts her nursing background to excellent use practicing medical malpractice and personal injury law in an office on Tyrone Boulevard in St. Petersburg.

She credits her partner, Ben DeBerg - her son, with giving her the opportunity to continue and expand her medical mission work. After Ben graduated from Stetson, he agreed to practice with her only if she continued her medical mission work. He has actually encouraged Danell to increase the number of trips she takes, as well as going on one to Guatemala himself. Her paralegal is her daughter, Allison. Her other daughter, Dana, is a paralegal in Tampa.

The things Danell sees would make most people blanch. On a trip to India, she was confronted with people living in the streets, many of whom had gangrene, tuberculosis, and leprosy. She explains that it can be discouraging when you see the "magnitude of the suffering." On every trip at least one member of their group is profoundly affected. "You can see the life changing effects."

Often, the members of their group are the first white people that the locals have ever seen. She even recalls a trip to Mauritania where their medical team was made up entirely of women. The locals were actually angry that men were not there delivering care because of their male-oriented culture. They permitted the care, but Danell recalls it being the one time she actually feared for her safety while on a mission trip.

They travel light, packing only two sets of scrubs, sneakers, a skirt and a shawl (often needed to meet the cultural demands of the area to which they are traveling). The rest of their two, seventy pound duffel bags are stuffed with medical equipment and medicine. They do not spare an inch, often deciding to leave what otherwise might be considered essential toiletries to leave space for medical supplies.

What they offer to the people they visit is invaluable. She recalls the story of a woman in Indonesia who had lived in the woods with her child for 3 years. The woman carried the child for miles to the village where their mission had set up its operations. In the same land, Christians and Muslims had been

# Heroes Among Us

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killing each other for as long as anyone could remember. The Christians had recently returned to their bombed out church after being forced away, and their Pastor told them that they had to go find their Muslim neighbors who needed care and bring them to the medical staff so they could receive care as well. Soon, they saw old Christian women bringing old Muslim women, and then more and more people came. All to receive basic medical services that they would never have received otherwise.

Of all the places she has visited, she recalls an orphanage in southern India. Each night, the local homeless population showed up at the gates of the orphanage. They were invited in, provided a bowl of rice, then each found their own quiet spot inside the gates in the yard where they bedded down for the night.

It is selfless work. The travel alone would sap the strength out of many people. For example, when she went to New Guinea, it took them 42 hours to get to their ultimate location. They are lucky if they are able to wash out their scrubs, much less get a bath. Her family will tell you that when they pick her up at the airport, the ride home from the airport usually involves having the windows down no matter what the weather is!

Were her efforts contained only to her trips abroad, it would be impressive enough. Yet Danell's service does not stop there. Until the St. Pete Free Clinic closed its Saturday operation in October, Danell was there providing care for 8 years. She continues over 8 years of service at Beacon House, the homeless shelter associated with the Free Clinic. She has spent a lot of time at St. Vincent's Soup Kitchen. She cooks and takes the children from the youth group at her church, Garden of Peace Lutheran, to help feed the homeless. She also teaches Sunday school at Garden of Peace, and was instrumental in organizing a cold weather homeless shelter at the church through the Pinellas County Homeless Coalition. On the occasion when she cannot attend a Homeless Coalition meeting, Allison will attend in her place.

On top of all of these efforts, she seems to be most proud about being a grandmother. She beams when she talks about spending two days during the week with her grandchildren. You can hear the pride when she explains that her grandson joins her at Beacon House, helping to serve the homeless.

It is rare to see a person who leads such a compassionate life, all by example. Danell does not seek accolades and was visibly embarrassed discussing all that she does for others. To say that she is extremely humble would be an understatement. When you speak to her it is obvious that what she does comes from the heart; it is part of what she is and what she believes. In typical Danell fashion, she gives the credit to her children. "Without my kids, I could not do any of it," she says. The respect others show for her is perhaps best summed up in a comment by her son and partner. Ben DeBerg says, "If you don't know what the right thing to do is, you just wait and see what Danell does."

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