

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Surgeon reaches out through humanitarian missions

By SHIRLEY GEORGE

FEELING FIT CORRESPONDENT

In 1989, local orthopedic surgeon Dr. David J. Kaler visited a friend in Dallas, who was also an orthopedic surgeon, in Dallas.

He was astonished when he saw a motorcycle in his friend's garage, so he asked him, "Have you lost your mind?" After taking a short ride, Kaler was hooked. He came home and bought a motorcycle.

The following year Kaler rode to Daytona to attend a rally. When he was close to the scheduled meeting place with his friend, he saw a grungy looking group of people. He called his friend to ask where he was. "You're looking at us," the friend said, "Man, we need to take you shopping."

When Kaler has free time, he enjoys riding his Harley Davidson motorcycle. "Riding is my outlet. Part of my brain is focused on the road, and the other is house cleaning, like cleaning out the cobwebs accumulated throughout the day," Kaler said.

The only states that Kaler and his wife, Erin, a certified registered nurse anesthetist, haven't ridden in are Washington, Oregon and Idaho. Among many of their adventures while biking, they have enjoyed white water rafting, hiking in Utah and a helicopter ride in Nevada.

Originally from Paducah, Ky., Kaler said, "My parents and grandparents were farmers, railroaders and ironworkers. No one was in the medical field."

Beginning studies

Kaler was a chemistry major in college, but he was bored. He changed to pre-med in his junior year and considered pediatrics. Then he did an orthopedic rotation in Memphis, and decided that would be his specialty.

Kaler received his bachelor of science degree in chemistry/biology from Murray State University in Murray, Ky., doctor of medicine degree from University of Louisville, and surgical internship at Baptist Memorial Hospital in Memphis, Tenn.

He was a fellow in orthopedic surgery at W.C. Campbell Clinic in Memphis, and had a fellowship in spinal surgery at Southern Illinois



PHOTO PROVIDED

Erin Kaler, nurse anesthetist (third row, second from left), and Port Charlotte orthopedic surgeon David Kaler, MD., (fourth row, fourth from left) were among the Faith in Practice volunteers who helped improve the physical conditions of people living in poverty in Guatemala.

University, Springfield, Ill.

Practicing locally

While visiting a friend in Port Charlotte, Kaler met Dr. Doug Nuelle, whose partner was leaving his orthopedic practice. Kaler accepted Nuelle's offer to join his practice in 1983. When Nuelle moved, Kaler took over the practice in 1999.

Dr. Jason Reiss and Dr. Howard Saslow have subsequently joined Kaler at the Charlotte Orthopedic Clinic, located at 4161 Tamiami Trail, Unit 101, in Port Charlotte.

Port Charlotte was very small when Kaler moved here. "It seemed the world stopped at a blinking light at Veterans Boulevard and U.S. Highway 41. Then McDonald's and Town Center Mall were built, and the area just grew," he reflected. "I'm pleased to live and work here; this is home."

Reaching out

Besides providing state-of-the-art orthopedic services to his patients, Kaler does a considerable amount of volunteer work — through missions and other charitable contributions.

From April 9-16, Kaler traveled to Guatemala with the Faith in Practice (FIP) organization along with 31 other volunteers.

The organization is a community of medical volunteers who work to improve the physical, spiritual and economic conditions of the poor in Central America. The team consisted of a variety of nationalities, ethnicities and backgrounds. FIP's mission statement is, "For it is in giving that we receive."

The premier surgery center, Ob-ras (means Works), serves 250,000 poor Guatemalans annually. The team completed 104 cases in four

days. Kaler performed 24 total knee replacement surgeries on 23 patients. Interpreters were provided.

"One 27-year-old (woman), who had been confined to a wheelchair for one year, had surgery and was walking before the team left Guatemala," Kaler said. "The people were so appreciative. They are sustained by their faith; that's all they have. In their minds, the team was sent by God. They believe that whatever is done is by God's direction."

Before this year's trip to Guatemala with FIP, Erin Kaler had gone three previous years. This was the doctor's first trip, but he said, "I'd go back next year in a heartbeat."

Still giving back

For more than 10 years, Kaler didn't get haircuts until his hair

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was long enough to donate to "Locks for Love," a charity that provides human hair to make wigs for disadvantaged children who suffer from long-term medical hair loss.

The Charlotte Players is another recipient of Kaler's benevolence. One of the walls in his office is covered with plaques — one for every year from 1995 to present — by the Charlotte Players for his financial contributions to the theater organization's productions.

Kaler is an active staff physician in the surgery departments at Peace River Regional Medical Center and Fawcett Memorial Hospital in Port Charlotte. He has been chief of staff, chairman of the department of surgery, chairman of utilization review committee, vice president of medical staff and served on the credential and surgical care evaluation committees. He has been elected doctor of the year at Fawcett Memorial Hospital. Kaler said he remains abreast of current patient care standards and surgical techniques by attending seminars, trainings and workshops.



PHOTO BY SHIRLEY GEORGE

David J. Kaler, MD, enjoys riding his Harley Davidson motorcycle whenever he has some free time.