

# Bringing the world out of the darkness

**W**e live in a nice, safe place, where few are hungry and good health care is available.

Certainly we have complaints, but when was the last time you saw a blind child, or even an adult, much less scores of them, who live in developing countries where hospitals often can't afford sutures, much less the latest equipment?

We don't think about it much. We can't identify with the staggering statistic that there are 1.5 million blind

children in the world, or that another child goes blind every minute. It doesn't compute.

They're appalling, but they are, after all, just numbers.

Until you see these things for yourself, that is. Until you see mothers carrying their blind children on their backs, hoping the visiting doctors from the West can bring them sight.

That's when the statistics become real and staggering.



PENIKIS

I had that opportunity - and it was an opportunity, though a grim one - recently when I was invited along by ORBIS, an international flying eye hospital, on its three-week mission to the Kingdom of Morocco. I accompanied Dr. Michael Vrabec, an Appleton ophthalmologist, who was making his 12th mission trip as a volunteer to work in developing countries.

Since 1982, these volunteer doctors from the West have restored sight to thousands of blind patients but, more importantly, have taught medical standards and techniques to thousands of doctors and nurses in the Third World so they can carry on the work.

Morocco certainly doesn't qualify as the saddest place in Africa. In many respects Morocco is a modern

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## PENIKIS: Medical care lacking due to government's priorities

From A-1

country and Casablanca a cosmopolitan city, but medical care is lacking because, as a high medical official told me, "The government has different priorities."

It is impressive to watch the Western doctors operate, but my interest in going there surpassed that. I have lived long enough and seen too much not to feel that we in the West have an obligation to the developing nations, who are only a plane ride away.

The very fine part of such a trip is to see what so many Americans are doing to improve the lot of the less fortunate. The ORBIS trip is just one shining example. There are others.

When you can get there in a day you know how small the world is, how tightly we are bound together, yet how disparate the wealth is. We "eat" up more than half of the world's gross national product, while other nations struggle to stay alive.

But the very fine part of such a trip is to also see what so many Americans are doing to improve the lot of the less fortunate. The ORBIS trip is just one shining example. There are others.

Over the years I've done many

stories with physicians and health care workers, missionaries and people with a mission who go to these countries to bring goods, to share their skills, to help wherever they can, not to see fine castles and spectacular deserts.

It's only a drop in the bucket, one might think, but you get enough drops and it could turn into a tide.

The one great pleasure I had on this trip came with the encounter of concerned young people - namely, the Peace Corps workers, who had left comfortable homes in the United States, put their futures on hold and gone off "to make a difference" in some not-so-comfortable places, places like



YANG

small villages in Morocco "where we had to kill a couple of rats before we could go to sleep," one of them told me.

They came from all over the country to serve as interpreters for ORBIS, among them Will Yang, 22, son of Dr. K.M. and Grace Yang of Appleton, a 1994 graduate of Appleton East High School and a biochemistry major at the University of Chicago.

He will go to graduate school upon return, but in the meantime he's hoping to make that difference by heading up a health and sanitation program in a village in southeast Morocco.

Mark George, 25, of St. Paul, Minn., feels exactly the same way. The grandson of Doris George of Wisconsin Rapids, he had already decided to become a doctor. After his experience with ORBIS and his stint in the Peace Corps, he plans to use his medical school

education to work with organizations such as Doctors Without Borders.

As an American, I am especially proud of the young people, but they come from all over the west: England, France, Germany. It is especially touching to see people

of underdeveloped nations who can afford it take part as well. India, Bulgaria, even Bangladesh were well represented in setting up self-help programs.

"We are, after all, a global village," a physician from India said. We are our brothers keepers.