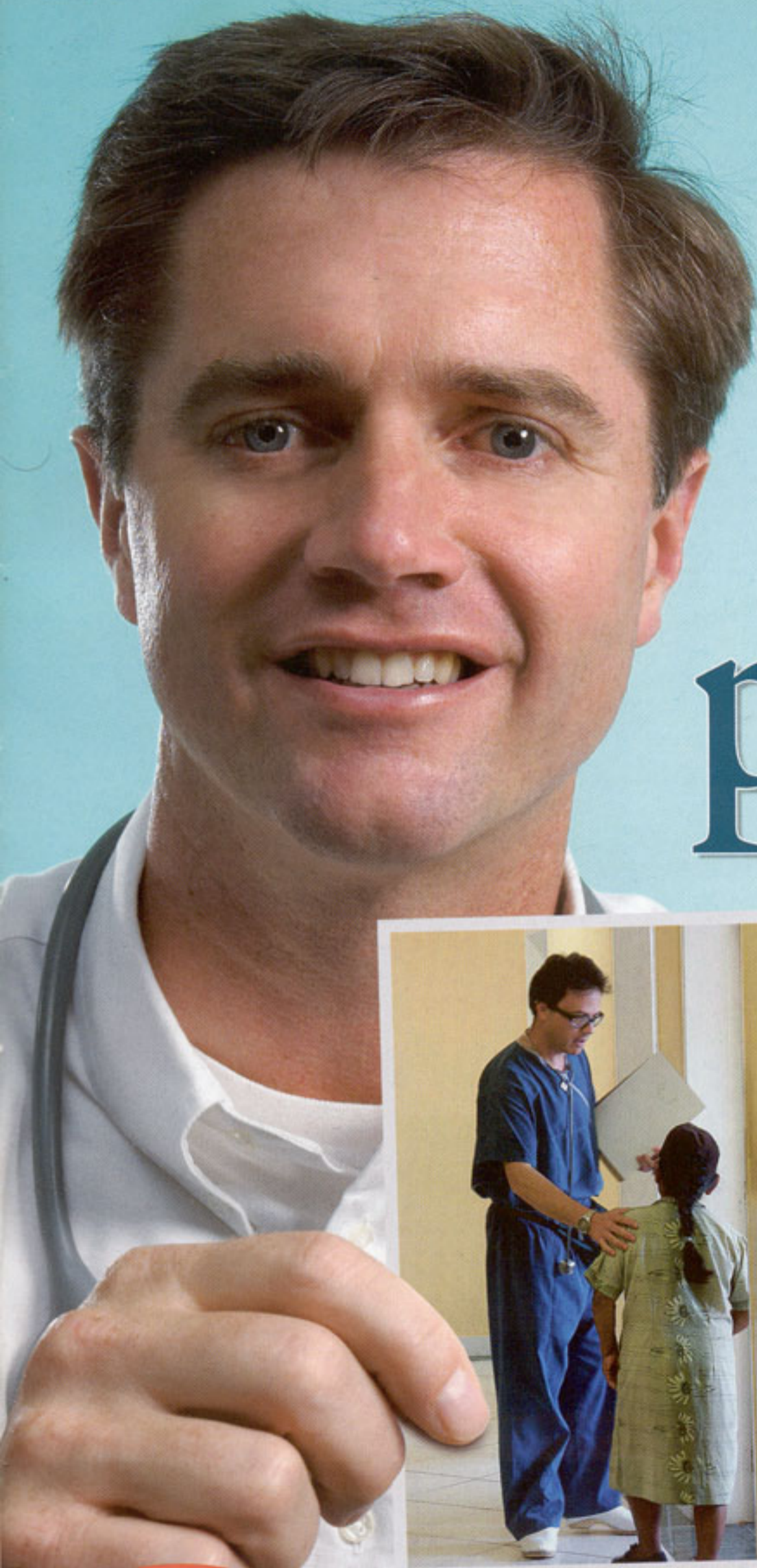


WEST EDITION

Milwaukee's Lifestyle Magazine

FEBRUARY 2008



## World Wide Webb

Dousman man recalls adventurous life while living abroad

# The picture of health



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February 2008  
\$2.99

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# The picture of health

Rural Ecuador has quality health care thanks to Dr. David Gaus



David Gaus wanted to be a bean counter when he grew up, but despite a business administration degree from the University of Notre Dame and the encouragement of his family, a veritable accounting firm, he didn't succeed.

Instead, he became Dr. David Gaus, founder and executive director of Andean Health and Development in Ecuador. He grew up in Wauwatosa, attended Mother of Good Counsel primary school and Marquette University High School. Shortly after graduating from Notre Dame, he accepted a volunteer position that would eventually take him and his young family to the country of the beautiful Andes Mountains and poor, agrarian populations that desperately need health care.

Gaus, his wife Elizabeth, daughters Gabriela and Sophia, and son Christopher, (all under the age of 11) live in Quito, the capitol. "I have such great kids. They love coming to Milwaukee to eat Leon's Custard, but in Ecuador they enjoy eating

guinea pig." Guinea pig? "Yes, it is considered a delicacy there." One can only assume they have no problems with their spinach.

Gaus is very smart and passionate about his work and not a little ironic. He takes his vocation seriously, but not himself. Quips come easily, for example: "We have over 20 varieties of bananas in Ecuador. I guess that qualifies us as a Banana Republic."

AHD's first and model hospital is located in Pedro Vicente Maldonado, a small town with a population, including the surrounding countryside, of about 50,000 people. It was opened in December 2000 and since then the 20 bed hospital has logged approximately 60,000 patient visits. The facility also includes an emergency room, outpatient area with six examining rooms, an operating room and an obstetrics unit. The care provided covers a gamut of diseases, childbirths, surgeries and emergencies. Some cases are indigenous problems, for example Chagas disease,

a parasitic infection caused by a creature called the assassin bug, malaria and snake bites.

The hospital has a staff of 45, all Ecuadorians. They include nurses, physicians, ancillary staff and office help. When the hospital opens in the morning, a line of approximately 70 people are waiting. Many of the people have walked or taken a long bus ride to get to the facility.

What was that volunteer position just out of college that caused the young accountant to change his life? "I'd heard Loret Miller Ruppe, then Peace Corps director, talk at commencement. I couldn't get in to the Peace Corps, but I wanted to do something helpful with my life. I'd heard about Father John Halligan's 'Working Boys Center.' So, in 1984, Gaus left to spend two years at 'Centro del Muchacho Trabajador' in Quito. "Father Halligan told me not to worry about anything like the equivalent of the Peace Corps' re-settlement allowance upon returning to the States. He said, 'I'll work



you so hard you won't survive to need one." Gaus thrived, survived and left Quito determined to come back some day to help change the health care provided in Ecuador.

It was Father Theodore Hesburgh, the legendary, former president of Notre Dame, who paved the way for Gaus' transition from accounting to medicine in 1986, and has remained an advisor and inspiration ever since. AHD is the only board the 90-year-old Jesuit continues to serve on. In order to apply for medical school, Gaus spent the next two years at Notre Dame taking the chemistry and biology courses no accountant ever needs.

When it came time to cover the tuition for pre-medical studies at Notre Dame and later, medical school at Tulane University, Gaus' story takes a real twist. No doubt the twist proves God moves in mysterious ways. Unknown to her millions of readers, Ann Landers, the columnist who for decades doled out wisdom for the sad, lonely, confused and lovelorn, used Father Hesburgh as a religious advisor for her responses. "He told her about me and she sent me through pre-med. For medical school, she used her connections with wealthy executives to raise the money. I was a young guy with crazy ideas and here were these wonderful people willing to support me. She lived near the Drake Hotel in Chicago where I used to visit her."

Gaus completed his education in Family Medicine at the University of Wisconsin and residency at St. Luke's in 1995, and returned to Ecuador in 1997 to pave the way for the hospital and its system of health care.

Nowadays, here is his typical week. Most people drive to work; Gaus drives down to work in Maldonado over harrowing roads; the drop in elevation from his home in Quito (one of the highest cities in the world) is about one and a third miles. Therefore, when he goes home, the drive is straight up. The trip takes about two hours each way. He leaves home on Tuesday morning about 6 a.m. and returns home on Thursday night. Fridays and Mondays he spends cajoling government ministries to cooperate on health projects. "One-on-one patient care is no longer the best use of my time. The Ecuadorian doctors are very good, but I can leverage what we've accomplished to improve health care for many, many more people.

Finally, the bean counter emerges. What makes AHD unique according to Gaus is that he has proved his original thesis that "health care in poor regions can be economically self-sustaining." Not that

he has anything against missionary efforts, but they tend to hinge on a person or group of persons and may not continue after they leave. Gaus wanted to establish a healthcare facility and system that would continue whether or not he was there.

"We use combinations of prepaid healthcare packages, a contract with the Ecuadorian Social Security System, along

**"I was a young guy  
with crazy ideas and  
here were these  
wonderful people  
willing to support me."**

~ Dr. David Gaus

with local government support and fee for service. Right now we recover about 90 percent of cost and believe it will be at 100 percent soon. We are the first rural hospital in Ecuador or anywhere else in rural Latin America to accomplish quality care through local funding. For comparison, a caesarian section in the U.S. costs around \$9,000, at AHD it costs \$180. We also have no religious affiliation." The

umbrella organization managing the four components is the Saludes Foundation. The success of the hospital in Maldonado has led to plans for three new hospitals in the next couple of years.

Gaus returns to Milwaukee every July and August to teach residents at St. Luke's patient care from the perspective of another country. While home, he visits his parents who now reside at St. Camillus. Then it is back to the country of high mountains, beautiful coasts, the Galapagos Islands, 1,600 bird species and 6,000 varieties of butterflies. What does it take to live long term in an emerging country besides becoming completely fluent in the language, in his case Spanish? "If you want to live in the developing world, you must relinquish the search for control in your life. We live in Quito because the rural areas lack clean water and schools for our children. I'm willing to make the drive for that. We shop at both indoor and outdoor markets for food. There is always uncertainty and chaos."

Maybe so, but Gaus projects an eagerness, even impatience, to get his work done here as quickly as possible to get back to his adopted home with or without chaos, and the people who desperately need his approach to health care. **M**



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