

Shining a Light Closer to Home

By Heather Fascia, Andrew Masselink, and Michelle Musial



“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven.” Matthew 5:16

Heather Fascia, Andrew Masselink, and Michelle Musial are currently fourth year pharmacy students at the Lloyd L. Gregory School of Pharmacy located in West Palm Beach, Florida. Their responsibilities while on this medical mission trip included: preparing educational materials, gathering and arranging medical supplies, setting up various health screening booths, educating patients on various medications/disease states and serving the community. These students also played a vital role as mentors to underclassmen and assisted them throughout the various health screening booths.

When most people think of missions, whether medical or evangelistic, they usually think of somewhere overseas. When we think about missions we now think about a place not more than an hour away from our own homes. Along with

international medical mission’s trips, each year Palm Beach Atlantic University Gregory School of Pharmacy conducts medical mission trips right here in the state of Florida. This year, ten pharmacy students and six faculty visited Belle Glade and Clewiston on one of these local mission trips. In West Palm Beach, the town we live in, we are used to seeing a variety of social classes but mostly middle to upper class. We are surrounded by a lot of luxury, from yachts to Bentleys to million dollar homes. Nothing could have prepared us for the whole different world we stepped into just on the other side of our own county.

Pulling into Belle Glade was definitely a shock to us all. Many of the homes seemed inhabitable and we thought they were just abandoned buildings. “We were saddened to find out that families actually lived in them” says Michelle. According to the United States Census Bureau, 38% of the people in Belle Glade are below poverty level. Many of the people spend their days either on their porch or at a local hang out

spot called “the loading dock.” In reality, this loading dock was just a big empty concrete lot that resembled a rugged parking lot. People gather there and sit all day long because there is nothing else to occupy their time. Most are unemployed and the few that have jobs are only able to work during the corn and sugar cane harvest seasons.

The most memorable stop in our Belle Glade trip was the Lighthouse Café. The name of this establishment seemed to capture our goal for this mission trip and resonate with our group Bible verse (Matthew 5:16). Lighthouse Café is truly a light that shines on this dark town. The inside of Lighthouse Café didn’t mimic the rugged area surrounding it. It was an incredibly warm and friendly environment. This really put us in a good mood and got us revved up to serve.

The biggest difference between an overseas mission trip and a local mission trip is our restriction on handing out medication locally. Our focus for this trip was on screening, education, and evangelism. At Lighthouse Café, we set up booths for blood pressure and blood sugar readings. We also had a kid’s booth set up with crafts and information geared towards a younger population. As the residents of Belle Glade started coming through the door, they were very pleased to see us. Most of them couldn’t believe that we were offering them health screenings for free, as affordable healthcare is not readily available to many inhabitants of Belle Glade. We saw a variety of different disease states from hypertension and diabetes to heart failure and HIV. We also encountered a very difficult and emotionally provoking case. This encounter began when our

patient, a lady, started to cry when we took her blood pressure. She was confused and barely able to stand. Her measured blood pressure was dangerously low. Upon sitting with her we learned that she has been diagnosed with AIDs. She recently had lost her mother who was the one person she had in her life to keep her on the right track. Since her mother passed, she began to abuse illegal medications and this led to the Department of Children and Families taking away her children. To cope with her heart-breaking situation she continued to take illegal drugs. We were desperate to do anything we could to help. The head of Lighthouse Café, Miss Tandra, told the patient to go talk to her case worker who was located down the road. She informed her that the case worker would get her to the hospital and get her the help she needed. Miss Tandra is also a light for this town. She truly cares about the people. She is definitely glorifying God in the work that she is doing.

We felt that we really made an impact for the community in Belle Glade. Many of the people appreciated us and came back all three days we were there to take advantage of our knowledge and services. They were eager to have us back and asked if we could come back soon. "It is nice to know that we did some good in their lives" said Heather. We all felt that our actions and services put a little light back into their lives.

After our services in Belle Glade, we headed to Clewiston Food Pantry. Clewiston Food Pantry provides supplemental meals to families in need. Along with the blood pressure and blood glucose screening, we also offered medication counseling and a brown bag station. "This was a great opportunity for the people of Clew-

iston to have access to free health screenings and medication advice" says Andy. What also made this experience different was the fact that we started each day preparing pre-packaged meals for the families. We filled bags with rice, canned beans, granola bars and frozen food. Although this may not have seemed like a lot to us at the time, we soon found out that this was all these families received for the month. Alice, the director of Clewiston Food Pantry, was very welcoming to our group and the residents of Clewiston were very happy to see us there.

One of the most memorable patient interactions at Clewiston involved a middle aged single woman who came to us to receive a blood pressure screening. During the interaction she expressed great concern about her overall health. With a few more questions, her entire emotional health story came rushing out. She informed us that she had lost extensive movement in her leg and now any daily activity had become quite a chore. With less physical activity and less ability to make and eat healthy food options, her blood pressure and cholesterol levels had risen significantly. Ultimately, this cycle led her to race to the emergency room when she lost vision in her left eye and experienced loss of muscle control throughout her body. She explained how she had to drive to the hospital by herself because she couldn't pay for an ambulance to come and get her. Once at the hospital, the doctors and nurses were extremely rude and did not effectively communicate with her what was going on with her body, or what was causing her symptoms. After a brief hospital stay, she was discharged, but stated she still had no idea what the doctors and nurses had done to treat her or help her. She is now awaiting

a bill from the hospital and is unsure how she will be able to pay for it. It was clear that we could not fix all of her problems. We could not make everything right. We had no ability to treat her medically but we could treat her spiritually by bringing the light of Christ into her life. After listening to such a heart wrenching story, a few of us gathered around her and asked if we could pray for her. We lifted her and her situation up to the Lord and asked for a blessing upon her. When a situation seems helpless it is best to involve the Lord, since He is the giver of hope and help. Even though we were only there for a short time we feel we spread light to these people. We let them know that there is hope, and as long as you trust in God, He will lead you in the right direction.

This medical mission experience is truly one we will never forget. As we can see in I John 1:5 "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all." Just as a lighthouse guides people to shore, we are to be a lighthouse for Christ. As Christians, we each hold the light, the Holy Spirit. So it's our job to guide others to Christ. Once we have the light of Christ in us, we shall be in darkness no more. We also feel that these patients shone a light for us. As students, we were able to use our knowledge and equipment to be a blessing to these patients. It was through these screening interactions that we were able to talk to them about Christ. The goal of this mission trip was to be a light for Christ, and we only hope that the light we shed on the people on Belle Glade and Clewiston will have a lasting spiritual healing. †