

The Medical Practicum group loading boats on a river in Nicaragua in 2018.



Courtesy of Manchester University

40 years of Manchester's Medical Practicum

don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.

—Albert Schweitzer

In 1980, campus pastor Bob Knechel at Manchester College (now Manchester University in North Manchester, Ind.) received a call from Fred La Mar, chaplain at DePauw University. DePauw had begun a program for nursing students to staff clinics in rural areas of Central America during January term. DePauw had many requests from underserved communities. Would Manchester consider doing something similar?

Knechel sent the request to chemistry professor Ed Miller, who noted that the proposed course aptly fulfilled Manchester's mission of faith, learning, and service. He and his wife, Martha, had participated in a workcamp at the Church of the Brethren mission in Ecuador and had other significant international experience, so he felt prepared to direct a January term course for students interested in health care professions. Manchester's Medical Practicum was born.



Courtesy of Manchester University

Ed Miller (at right) celebrating 40 years with current director Jeff Osborne.

The first trip assisted the Episcopal Church in Guatemala. Physician Don Parker, a college classmate of Miller, was instrumental in the success of this first trip and continued to participate. Dentist Rick Myers, a former student of Miller, also joined that first trip and several others.

Miller continued to take students and health care providers to sites in Panama, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua for more than 10 years, always working with local churches and organizations. In Nicaragua, locations moved from Mulukukú to Santa María with directors Terrie Salupo-Bryant for two years and Julie Garber for three years. Jeff Osborne started directing the practicum in 2008, initially at Ciudad Antigua and then moving Nicaraguan locations to the Coco and Bocay rivers. He returned to Guatemala in 2019.

Directors share the goal of providing learning for students while serving people in areas of need. Osborne understands the importance of working with rather than “doing good for.” He wants students to “continue seeking ways to serve and how to serve in order to improve the human condition.” His orientation materials include this quote from Lilla Watson: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Of the 139 health care providers and leaders of the practicum, nearly half have been Brethren. These professionals pay their own way and often take vacation time to participate. Those who have participated the most number of

times include Joel Eikenberry, Rachel Long, Lee Smith, Robert Studebaker, and Norm Waggy (6); Bette Cowan, Lois Johnson, and Don Parker (9); Kathy Long and Mark Shafer (10); Paul Fry-Miller (12); Bill Fike (14); Jeff Osborne (12); and Ed Miller (25).

In 2020, 11 of 16 providers were Brethren and several had connections with the Nigerian church. For example, Eikenberry was born and raised in Nigeria, a son of former mission workers Ivan and Mary Eikenberry; Rhonda Whitten heard stories of Garkida, Nigeria, in the 1930s and '40s from her great uncle; Fry-Miller has traveled to Nigeria to assist those traumatized by Boko Haram; Waggy served in Garkida with the Rural Health Program.

Fike, a physician from Painesville Church of the Brethren, said he values the practicum “to make a difference in another's life. Fifty years from now, no one will remember what kind of car we drove, or who we were, but rather by the difference we make in the life of a patient or student—that is our legacy.”

Lori Zimmerman, a physician from Manchester Church of the Brethren, reflected on her experience as a student and as a provider, returning to participate alongside daughter Karly. “In 1990, the medical practicum was the experience that solidified my desire to go into medicine,” Zimmerman said. “This experience provides such a unique opportunity for undergraduate students to see health care up close and work side-by-side with physicians. Providing care to underserved communities while working with Manchester students was so rewarding. Having my daughter on the trip was icing on the cake.” —Beverly Eikenberry