

# Beyond Hearth and Home

## *The Call from Africa*



BY MEGAN ABIGAIL CHANDLER

*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations ...*

— Matthew 28:19

*As we look homeward and inward seeking to address our immediate concerns, we should also keep abreast of our global responsibilities. This holiday season remember the non-profit organizations, such as the one profiled here, that lend a helping hand among the less fortunate in distant lands. Christians look at this as fulfillment of the Great Commission, as quoted above.*

As citizens of the Lowcountry, we must count our blessings for a number of reasons. Consider the incandescent scenery, friendly locals and weather that may only be described through the dreams of poets. But what is so special about all of this is the opportunity that blessings afford. Matt Alexander and Ed O'Bryan are the direct beneficiaries of nature's local benevolence.

In October 2008, the two 20-something men took advantage of sunny and warm autumn weather. They packed up their surfboards, donned their wet suits and made their way to the beach. However, it's not the waves that they will remember from that trip. What they will

remember most is the idea that was born from those moments.

It was on that day that Alexander, a business professional with non-profit experience, and O'Bryan, a physician at the Veterans Hospital, forged a life-changing partnership on a surfing trip. This partnership would initiate the creation of Palmetto Medical Initiative, a Charleston-based non-profit organization with a commitment to bringing sustainable healthcare to those in dire need of qualified help. It simultaneously allows medical missions opportunities to those with an interest in humanitarian work and has created an international healthcare curriculum that allows young physicians and MUSC medical students to expand their experience and knowledge in Africa while getting academic credit. Today, PMI is dedicated to providing self-sustaining medical facilities and infrastructure to Africa, but their vision is to impart these opportunities globally.

The organization, in its rookie year, has surpassed the expectations of all involved, including the organization's benefactor and mentor, Bob Faith, CEO of a national real estate company and former secretary of commerce for the state of South Carolina. Faith had visited an area in Uganda that was in serious need of an organization matching the description of PMI. In January 2009, Alexander,

O'Bryan and Faith boarded a flight to Masindi, a small town in northwestern Uganda. On this initial venture, Alexander and O'Bryan worked tirelessly forming ties with locals and decided that Masindi was exactly where they belonged.

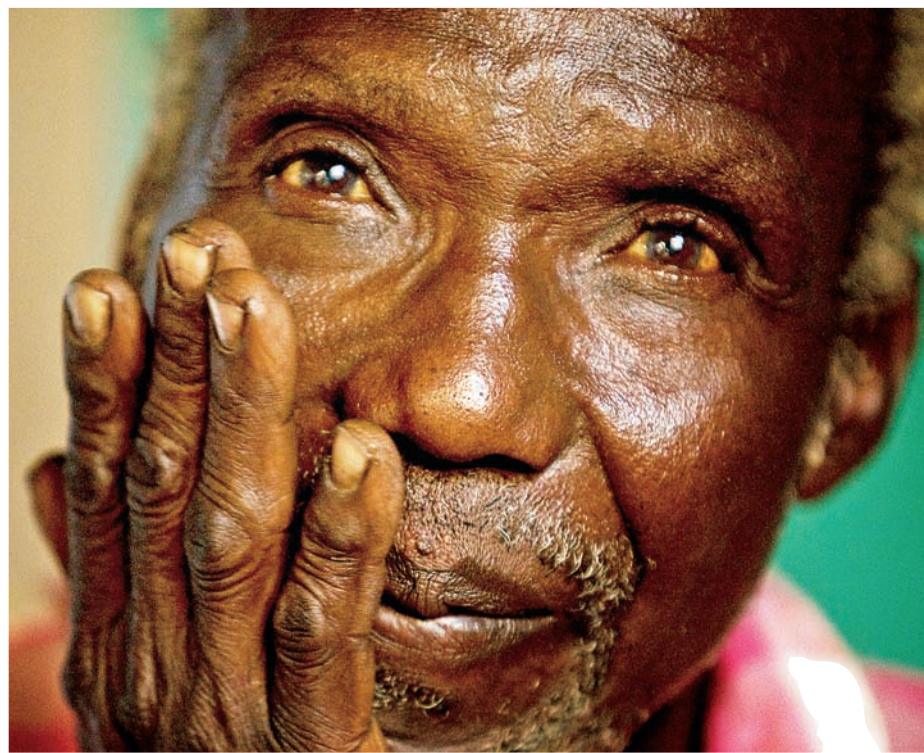
The inaugural short-term medical mission trip was taken in March 2009, when 27 volunteers pushed forward with PMI's endeavors to treat more than 1,100 Ugandans. Another successful trip was coordinated in May 2009, and one is planned for December 2009. By the end of this first year, it is estimated that PMI will treat more than 6,000 Ugandans. With a characteristic generosity of spirit, qualified physicians, medical students, nurses, ministers, businessmen and all with a heart for humanitarianism will bring to Uganda something that we are only too blessed to have in Charleston — health and happiness.

O'Bryan explains, "With medical relief work abroad, you are able to see true poverty and destitution. Your skills, as small as they seem here as a student, are so powerful abroad." It is with that humble honesty that he takes the third batch of travelers to Masindi this holiday season. Departing from loved ones two weeks before the holidays lends itself to some anxieties, as the worries of African travel set in. Alexander and O'Bryan are assured that safety is a priority and that outpour-

ing of graciousness is a protective bubble all its own. Alexander continues, "Africa can always prove itself to be unpredictable and fragile at times," but with a sturdy dose of compassion running through his veins, he understands that a gift worth giving, such as those given by PMI, often takes an abundance of selflessness and bravery.

And locals are gravitating to the wildly successful program, so much so that Alexander and O'Bryan have brought on Marianne Heis as administrative manager. Heis says, "It's crazy how many people have a heart for Africa." The simplicity of her words is dynamic, addressing the root of the message they put out. Alexander further explains, "What we're doing is beautifully simple." They are offering an opportunity to give back permanently, to offer the Third World something that we live with day in and day out. They are bringing to the forefront of local missions something determined to build a legacy. As O'Bryan eloquently puts it, "No one can go over there and come back unchanged."

*For more information, visit [www.palmettomedical.org](http://www.palmettomedical.org) or contact Marianne Heis via [marianne@palmettomedical.org](mailto:marianne@palmettomedical.org).*



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSHUA DRAKE

*(Above) A grateful patient receives care at the temporary clinic site.*

*(Opposite Page, Top) Lines of locals hoping to be seen by PMI volunteers typically range from 200-500 people every morning.*



*Locals wait, hope and pray for qualified care*