

Orbis's Volunteer Faculty Share Their Expertise With Eye Care Colleagues in Countries Far from Home

You could call them the wind beneath the wings of the Flying Eye Hospital.

They're the 400 members of Orbis's Volunteer Faculty (VF), who leave their practices for a week or two each year to board the Flying Eye Hospital and conduct training programs for eye care colleagues in other parts of the world. Without their dedicated service, the accomplishments of the 40-year partnership between Alcon and Orbis would not have been possible.

Nor would it be possible to talk about the VF contributions without acknowledging the role of Danielle Bogert, who as Director of Faculty Relations is "the steward" of Orbis's cadre of volunteer medical professionals from 30 countries.

Orbis deploys "a very global and diverse group" of VF members from all ophthalmic areas, including ophthalmologists, anesthesiologists, ophthalmic nurses, optometrists and biomedical engineers, according to Danielle. In addition to conducting training programs in the air and on the ground in 18 countries, VF efforts extend Orbis's reach into 165 countries through its Cybersight telemedicine platform.

Danielle, who is marking her 25th anniversary with Orbis this year, knows all of them -- the veterans, the newcomers and those in between.

"I've watched some guys go from their late 30s, early 40s, when they were starting out in their careers, and they're still volunteering today," Danielle related. "Now many of them are starting to reach retirement age, but I think what keeps the veterans coming back is that when they go out on an Orbis trip, everything melts away from billing, coding and insurance.

"They can apply their expertise, education and training to just helping people," she added. "For them, volunteering is about the simplified joy of going out for a week to restore sight or prevent blindness and to teach and train."

As for the younger doctors who are in the process of establishing themselves and building their practices, "volunteering is a relief," she said. "It provides the balance they need" in their lives.

Regardless of their age and experience, all VF members share a desire to help and gratification at knowing they're contributing to sustainable eye health in underserved parts of the world, she added.



The Renaissance Man

When Steve Charles, MD, became a VF for Orbis in 1997, he was just “trying to do some good,” although one could argue that he already does more than his share of good closer to home.

Steve, one of the world’s foremost retinal surgeons, practices at the Charles Retina Institute in Memphis, Tennessee, where he’s earned a reputation for helping those who need care and can’t afford it. He’s also an engineer, pilot, author, inventor – he holds about 150 patents – and teacher. He’s been honored more times than he can count and a grateful patient even wrote a book about him.

Steve is quick to say that he doesn’t play golf or belong to a country club, own a house or a pet, and hasn’t taken a vacation or seen a movie in more than 25 years. Those pursuits would take time away from what matters most to him – helping people see and spending time with his three daughters and four grandchildren.

As an Orbis volunteer, Steve has served on all three of the Flying Eye Hospitals, a distinction that makes this pilot proud. He characterized his volunteer activities with Orbis as a means of “sharing ideas with colleagues” rather than mentoring, a word he considers disrespectful in referring to other physicians. For him, the efforts are about building sustainable eye care.

“We’re here to make people see, that’s it, that’s what we do,” Steve said candidly. “That’s what Orbis does, that’s what Alcon does.”

The Adventurer

Sandra Johnson, MD, revels in adventure, like the time a reservation error caused her to miss a flight bound for an Orbis program in Tanzania. She wound up staying in a “really darling” hotel of stand-alone concrete huts built to resemble the traditional homes of the Maasai, an African people known for their distinctive customs and dress.



Some would be angry about the delay or put off by unfamiliar surroundings, but not Sandy. “It was a cool little diversion,” she said with obvious pleasure.

That sense of adventure, ability to go with the flow and curiosity about what’s around the corner – together with her commitment to helping others see – are the reasons Sandy has been a VF member since 2006. A glaucoma specialist in West Florida, she has participated in plane- and hospital-based Orbis programs in China, Syria, Indonesia, Jamaica, Tanzania and Zambia.

While she’ll go anywhere Orbis needs her, Sandy’s favorite destination is Africa. She particularly enjoys the “continuity” of returning to countries of past trainings to learn how local doctors are using what they learned. Between visits, Sandy remains in touch with trainees via email, often posting scientific articles of interest because, as she explained, many trainees lack library access.

Sandy spoke fondly of a Zambian surgeon who is now in the process of setting up her practice, having completed a glaucoma fellowship following an Orbis program that Sandy conducted.

“She may be the only glaucoma specialist in the whole country” of almost 18 million people¹, Sandy said with pride, and “that all comes out of the Orbis project.”

#

Reference

- 1) "Zambia Population 2019." *worldpopulationreview.com*. World Population Review, accessed 17 September 2019. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/zambia-population/>