

Greenacres father and son bandage and bond — in Bhutan

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By LOUISE WOLLMAN

Standing 6 foot 5, he was as huge a presence to those faraway people as the 20,000-foot Himalayan peaks that are the backdrop of their daily lives.

And perhaps as exalted, too, for he offered the possibility of healing Western-style to the small, frequently stooped Bhutanese people who came to him maimed from falls and farm accidents. To get to the volunteer American orthopedist they traveled two and three days, enduring their open fractures and dislocated joints with the unruffled acceptance of their Buddhist faith. The country has but one paved road, which leads to Thimpu, the capital city, and the 100-bed hospital. But getting to it can be arduous.

"They might live in the next village but have to go into India and then back into Bhutan," says Dr. George Zambetti, a Brite Avenue resident who this May spent three weeks away from his Manhattan sports medicine practice lending his expertise to that distant Buddhist monarchy, the last of its kind in the world. It took four whole days of traveling for Zambetti to get there and back.

He went under the auspices of the orthopedic division of Washington, DC-based Health Volunteers Overseas, which, since 1985, has sent more than 1,500 orthopedists to countries around the world.

The 45-year-old Scarsdalian worked in primitive conditions, seeing 40 patients a day in clinic, performing a total of 25 operations in the four days he was allotted the operating room. The only implant devices available to him were outdated, donated prosthetics from the United States. Though they were almost universally too big for the tiny people, seat-of-pants improvisation usually saved the day. Zambetti calls it "practice in its purest form — basic orthopedics, using the principles you learn as a resident, without any sort of hindrance. You just did what was appropriate and what you could do under the circumstances."

In Bhutan what would be merely a simple emergency if treated on location can easily become limb-threatening. Because of the enormous potential for infection and the lack of antibiotics, the treatment of choice might therefore be two months of hospitalization in traction. "Here you try to make it perfect, but there you'd accept a deformity versus the risk of surgery," he says in a distinctively hoarse voice.



Above, Bhutanese hospital patient in traction, with family members who come to help with the recuperation process



Left, Matt Zambetti, with just a few of his classmates

Beyond the exhilaration of ministering to truly needy patients, there were no insurance forms, no HMOs, and with the government — which provides universal, free medical care — grateful for the volunteer services, no one was hovering over his shoulder.

The patients were unvaryingly uncomplaining, incredibly appreciative. Zambetti's respect for these proud people is obvious: "They have a tough life, 90 percent are farmers and farm by hand. We'd consider them to have less freedom than we have but their level of contentment is much higher." The doctor is earnest and thoughtful; his manner says he is no stranger himself to the workings of inner peace.

He saw no crime and no begging anywhere, no capitalistic scrambling

for advantage and even tipping is prohibited. The populace is clothed, housed, fed and schooled, all courtesy of the benevolent, Harvard-educated monarch, King Jigme Wangchuk.

All-American

If the Bhutanese caught, in this case quite literally, a lucky break, so did the elder Zambetti son. Though Doctor Mom, Eileen Zambetti, a radiologist, might theoretically have left her own Montefiore Medical Center practice to accompany her husband, she would not leave the five children at home, and so 10-year-old Matt got to make the trip with Dad.

"With both of us being physicians, all we'd think about is the worst that can happen. We just don't do it,"



Right, Dr. George Zambetti, out of official O.R. duds, with 10-year-old Matt Zambetti, in traditional Bhutanese school (and life) uniform.

Eileen says, speaking as if she'd turned down no more than dinner out and a local movie.

There's that wholesome, unspoiled 50s aura about the Zambettis, a bobby-sox, Madras-bermudas, every-one-out-in-the-backyard-to-play-tag sensibility.

One sweltering July evening the family (minus 14-year-old Julie who's at camp) is gathered in the living room and no one complains that it isn't air conditioned. The three younger kids sit side-by-side, their Norman Rockwell faces set intently as Dad and Matt share their adventure, behaving as if they haven't already heard the story or seen the pictures at least 50 times. Ages 9, 8 and 5, they don't fidget, they don't fight and they don't interrupt. When they've had enough, the three tow-

heads sidle over to Mom with a whispered request and disappear upstairs.

Mom herself, tall and willowy, wears a striped sundress, her thick hair sweeping back over one ear. Katharine Hepburn comes to mind.

Just the fax

The one condition the Greenacres School set for Matt missing three weeks in the classroom was that he attend school in Bhutan (if he could get the necessary special permission) and fax back — via the Ministry of Health — written reports to his fifth-grade classmates. The classroom work would pose minimal problems since, by order of the king, English is spoken in school, presumably because there are so many dialects of the national language, Dzongkha. (pro-

nounced Zon-kah).

"Today was the first Saturday in my life that I went to school," said one of the boy's early communications. He was surprised to discover 45 kids in his class at the primary Chang Zam Tok school and a student body of 1,400. Likewise, that their summer-vacation equivalent comes in January and February because no building in Bhutan is heated, not even the hospital, and the temperatures drop to 20 and 30 degrees in winter.

Matt wrote he was "ticked because the social studies teacher whacked all the kids in my class, including me, on the hand for no reason." It was "weird," he said, for Bhutanese kids, scooping up the rice from shared bowls with their hands, to watch their American schoolmate bite into something they'd never seen — a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Back in his Scarsdale living room, the 10-year-old recalls, "The first day was hard, with 1,400 kids staring at me (but in a friendly way) but the next day was fine." As the first foreign child ever allowed in the school, he was an instant celebrity, eventually made lots of friends and came home with a pen pal named Palden.

Not even a fly

Not surprisingly, the Scarsdale youngster was a star in English class but not so in science, where students, grouped by ability rather than age, studied organic farming, a national preoccupation. "We talked about manure and cows and fertilizers and the chemistry of plants and crop rotation," he says.

"The country is much more conscious of the impact of humans on the environment and their religion doesn't give mankind so much importance over everything else," Eileen comments.

"If a dog wants to walk in the hospital he does," says George. "He's not escorted out, pushed out, it's not even suggested. They accept every living thing."

They won't so much as kill a fly or even swat at one. "This made surgery and sterility kind of tough, not to mention treating infections difficult," George observes.

He describes the open-air hospital as "like a war zone — not for the faint of heart, what with people in traction, people with open wounds, people with mangled hands and all kinds of other farm injuries."

The odor was strong and the air always dank, because every morning workers flood the floors with water.

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and, using giant "squeegies," push it into troughs at the perimeter.

The hospital was "typically a mob scene," with 16 people to a ward, and at least double that number in the form of family members who come to help with the recuperative process. "The nurses are very good but there are such horrific problems, it's difficult for them to keep up," he says.

Bhutan, the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined, is at least 30 years behind, medically and scientifically. There were no fancy CAT scans and MRIs — Zambetti had only basic blood tests and the simplest of x-rays to guide him.

One day during a hip operation he sawed down and installed a stainless rod that was already out of date in 1976 when he was a medical student. "It was like working with vintage World War II appliances," he remarks.

Bhutanese ballhog

Matt runs upstairs on long, spindly legs to retrieve his Bhutanese school-

wear, color-coded by school, which, in fact, is also the national uniform for everyone. His father wraps him in the gray kimono — an oversized bathrobe-affair called a "gho." Cut extra long, it is bloused voluminously above the waist with a sash, which creates a large pouch on either side for storing books, pencils, lunch, farm tools, whatever.

"Guess what?," Matt wrote home. "I played basketball with the crown prince. He was a ballhog, took all the shots, everyone passed to him and he didn't play defense. He only made one basket out of about 14 attempts. Then he took his ball and went home."

Because toys are a luxury in a price-controlled economy where people make the equivalent of \$6 a week, it was the only basketball in the country. That is, until Matt presented one to the school when he left.

"It took 2 1/2 hours to get it pumped up," the boy laughs, flashing a keyboard's worth of teeth. Sent from pillar to post by well meaning but misinformed Bhutanese, the two

Zambettis walked the length of the town three times to find the person with the pump.

Got his money's worth

The Zambetti father and son were billeted in a guest house on the hospital grounds with — remarkable in Bhutan — running water and a refrigerator. Official guests of the royal government, they were allowed, in their spare moments of travel, to visit the massive fortresses-cum-monasteries, protected by military police from non-Buddhist, non-credentialed intrusion.

Meals may have been cheap but the sojourn cost the family some \$4,000 in airfare and inoculations alone. Not to mention lost income. Though he won't share that figure, according to American Medical Association statistics, the mean pre-tax personal income for an orthopedic surgeon in 1994 was \$310,000, or \$5961 weekly. Orthopedists were the highest paid medical specialists, making \$32,000 more than cardiologists, the next highest earners.

But as far as George Zambetti is concerned, the Bhutan experience was more than worth it, as was a similar stint in Saint Lucia two years ago, again under the auspices of Health Volunteers Overseas.

The couple, married 16 years, believe, as Eileen puts it, "we can all give back something of our medical training to people who really need it."

The orthopedist plans to continue his biannual volunteerism. Aside from his respect for the humanity of the people and the courage of the patients, the opportunity for daily creativity in surgery, there was the opportunity to bond with his son. "Not a day goes by that Matt and I don't think of some aspect of it," he says. Matt, sitting beside him, nods his crewcut head in agreement.

And, as an added and unexpected bonus, George came home to a happy surprise: his name on the New York Magazine "Best Doctors" list. "The joke was I always knew there was a God, but now I had to wonder if he was Buddhist!" he said.