

[DEPARTMENT]

GIVING BACK

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On his mission trips to Peru, Dr. Robert Wilke helps five to six children per day, like this 7-year-old girl from a small town outside Lima who suffered a cleft lip and palate prior to her operation (as shown).

All Smiles

Through a simple cleft lip and palate operation, a local plastic surgeon is giving South American kids their grins back.

DR. ROBERT WILKE OF EDINA PLASTIC SURGERY ALWAYS KNEW HE WANTED TO BE A DOCTOR. But he probably didn't know he would be traveling across the globe, changing the lives of South American children and their families.

After attending medical school at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and completing his residency there in 1997, Wilke moved to the Twin Cities, where he joined Edina Plastic Surgery.

“[Plastics] is a much more positive thing. A lot of surgery can be negative,” Wilke explains about his decision to become a plastic surgeon. “I wanted to be able to do something that makes people happy.”

And Wilke has definitely made a lot of people happy.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. ROBERT WILKE

In 2001, Wilke packed his bags (and lots of medical supplies) for his first medical mission trip to Puno, Peru, as a doctor with Edina Plastic Surgery. Wilke wasn't a stranger to the idea of such trips, though; in 1997 he went on a mission trip to Ecuador with a university team and UW Madison plastic surgery chairman Dave Dibbell (who helped pioneer the school's medical mission trips to South America during Wilke's time at the school).

"It was a phenomenal experience," Wilke remarks. "Coming out of that program, everyone had some affection for the idea of donating [medical] service. It's something I felt I should do and wanted to do."

Later, when Wilke joined Edina Plastic Surgery, he learned that its now-retired founder Dr. Bill Carter (who also did his plastic surgery training at UW) shared the same passion for medical mission trips. The two went on the trip to Puno together, where they spent two weeks doing cleft lip and palate surgeries for children.

That first trip with the practice is what got Wilke going to Peru, and he has since joined a group of doctors and nurses that takes an annual trip to Lima, Peru. The trips were started by plastic surgeon Frank Pilney from St. Paul, who traveled with just one anesthesiologist. Little by little, the group burgeoned into a well-established group of medical professionals and even occasional volunteers who just want to lend a hand.

Though many of the surgeons are local to the Twin Cities and consider themselves business competitors, that is definitely not the case once they set foot on Peruvian soil. The goal there is simple: to help as many kids as possible.

Unlike many other organizations, the doctors and

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— *Dr. Robert Wilke*

nurses on these trips to Lima fund their own travels, donate additional medical supplies, and pay for their own airfare and lodging on these one- to two-week trips.

Upon arrival, the team sets up operating rooms that might be considered crude by American standards. "Part of the adventure is not knowing what you're going to encounter," Wilke says. Knowing that, the team brings as much equipment and as many medical supplies as possible.

Once the facilities are ready to go, the surgeons spend their days doing five to six surgeries per day—most of them cleft lip and palate—for lines of children and their families who have been waiting for the team to arrive. Sometimes families will send kids by themselves if they have to, while other families hike for days to get there and camp outside the hospital in tents. "It really shows the spirit of the people there," Wilke says.

The cleft lip and palate is a fairly challenging surgery technically; however, it doesn't require complex instrumentation and only takes about an hour to complete, according to Wilke. The kids recover quickly, often leaving the hospital the next day. "We can really give these kids their life back," Wilke says of helping correct such severe facial abnormalities for these children. "The impact of that is never really lost."//