



Free medical care headed to Philippines Many volunteers are Filipino doctors practicing in U.S.

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DURHAM -- Dr. Arturo de Leon, a former family physician in Raleigh, began his medical career as a missionary doctor and, after retiring 10 years ago at the age of 60, has gone back to his roots -- quite literally.

On Jan. 26, he and dozens of other medical professionals and volunteers from area hospitals, as well as from around the country, will travel to Davao City in the southern Philippines to provide free medical care and surgery to the impoverished indigenous population for several days. Many volunteers are Filipino doctors practicing in the U.S. who are familiar with the culture and customs.

This annual trip to the Southeast Asian nation is part of the Carolina Medical Mission, a nonprofit organization born from the Philippine American Association of North Carolina, or PAANC, in 1994.

De Leon was born, raised and educated in the Philippines. He came to the United States in 1964 to continue his medical training and kept being reminded of what he had seen and experienced at home.

"It's a shame for us Filipinos that we could not take care of our own people," he said. The Philippines is the world's 12th most populous country, with about 90 million people.

So, when he heard that a former Raleigh policeman, Doug Hinton, was leading a group of doctors and dentists to Bohol in 1993, de Leon gathered a few of his family and friends and went along.

On that first trip, they saw about 500 patients. Since then, the team has continued to grow and has seen about 90,000.

"I look at it as providence," de Leon said. "After looking back, it looks like God is with CMM."

Each year the team goes to a different province -- the archipelago nation of more than 7,100 islands has 81 provinces in all -- and works with a partner team of native medical professionals.

"They give their time free so that we can give them some target money and take care of their transportation," de Leon said. "We become friends. Every year, it's just like a family reunion."

The partner team starts working a year ahead of time while the U.S. team plans and raises funds for its trip -- members pay for their own travel and lodging expenses.

The U.S. coordinator for the Davao City mission, Jesse Pasion, is an intensive care nurse at the VA Medical Center in Durham. He is in charge of raising funds for next January, but he's having a hard time because of the recession. Still, several events are in the works, and many churches have contributed. He's heartened by the fact that people from different faiths are coming together to help mankind.

This collaboration of faiths is also present in Davao City, he said, in a way that many could learn from.

"It's a microcosm of what the world should be," he said. "Christians and Muslims get along, and we're serving both. We'll see that our faiths are no different -- we serve the same God."

He admitted that he didn't fully appreciate the program when he was president of PAANC. After he went to Dumaguete in 2007, he called his trip a life-altering experience.

Also on that mission were Tim McGloin, retired assistant director for Tobacco Prevention at the Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention at UNC, and his wife, Linda, both longtime members of PAANC. They decided to join the mission in 2007 because Dumaguete is Linda's hometown.

De Leon said there are different medical needs in different provinces, but that the main problem is respiratory complications because of the lack of sanitary conditions.

The clinic at Dumaguete opened at 7:30 a.m. and McGloin said hundreds of people would line up outside the door all day.

"In the daily clinics you'll see an average of 1,000 a day. In five days we served about 5,000 people, so we got a good look at what the health issues and living conditions are."

Pasion expects the Davao City mission to be a successful one, and he hopes that CMM can interest younger people in joining because they'll be the ones "taking over" in a couple of years.

"It's a life commitment," he said. "For me, it defines my legacy. Obviously, all of us have one to leave in this world, and service to mankind I think would be one of the best ones we could leave," he said.

Carolina Medical Mission trips are not restricted to medical professionals. De Leon said this is a common misconception.

His granddaughter was 14 when she first went, and it was her idea to try to take the mission to countries other than the Philippines. Soon after, Pasion was approached by someone suggesting the group go to China, which they have done for the past four years. There is also talk of sending a team to India in the future, depending on funds.

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