

**WTS Original Article by Kathleen Fenton, MD  
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“Because there are children there who need surgery!” I find myself giving this response frequently these days, because so many people ask me why I go to some of the places I frequently go.

I live in Managua, Nicaragua, and I have been working for the International Children’s Heart Foundation for almost seven years. Roughly 90% of the world’s children are born in



WTS member, Kathleen Fenton, MD (right), works for Children's Heart Foundation in Managua, Nicaragua treating children with congenital heart defects.

countries where there is limited or no access to congenital heart surgery, and 1% of all infants are born with a heart defect that requires surgery for survival. That adds up to a lot of children. Each child has a story, and if you get me started, I will easily tell you one after another, stories of little “blue” children with clubbing the likes of which I had never seen in the US, who had to stop going to school because they didn’t have the energy to walk there anymore; stories of children so thin they looked like concentration camp inmates, with hearts that filled up their chest x-rays though in some cases they “only” had an ASD or a PDA, and stories of desperate parents who had given up hope to the point where they decided to just focus on the other kids in the family, because this one was already lost.

Working in a developing country had been in my mind ever since I was a research fellow in Boston, listening to Aldo Castaneda talk about Guatemala. Several years later, I made a trip with Kirk Kanter to El Salvador and there, for the first time, experienced the need first hand. The 2006 STS meeting, though, wins the award for being the meeting that resulted in the greatest “change in my practice”- I attended several talks on cardiac surgery in developing countries and was really struck by the data presented. Immediately I wanted to do something about it! That year, I made two trips to Nicaragua with ICHF, and definitively relocated in December to start ICHF’s first “in country” project. Since then, I have worked as a member of an otherwise fully Nicaraguan team – operating with a Nicaraguan surgeon who had only completed his training one year before I arrived and who was eager to start a congenital heart surgery program. We have learned an immense amount from each other. There have been lots of stops and starts and setbacks, but we now have the program up and running and are able to do basic and mid-level congenital heart surgery on a continuous basis.

By summer 2011 we were happy with the progress in Nicaragua, so I began to make trips with ICHF medical teams to other countries. This allows me to

operate regularly and at the same time have the Nicaraguan surgeon do all the surgery in Nicaragua. In the past two years, I have made three trips with medical teams to the Dominican Republic, four to Honduras, four to Ecuador and five to Benghazi, Libya. I particularly enjoyed making the first-ever trips to Santo Domingo and Benghazi: it's exciting to do heart surgery where it has never been done before! It's also very gratifying to make repeated trips to the same country. We work with the same local team each time, and often also have many "repeat" ICHF team members. This enables us to really recognize both the progress that the local staff makes as well as the areas that still need work. It also makes it possible, in many cases, to see children who had surgery on previous trips.

My work with ICHF is also gratifying on a personal level. I believe that traveling in general is a tremendously broadening educational experience: just to see other places (both within and outside one's home country) is to learn and grow. However, being able to work in another country, side by side with professionals from widely varied backgrounds, goes well beyond the already-valuable experience of being a tourist. In Nicaragua, I have truly learned another language and a whole new culture. Traveling to other Latin American countries, I learn not only new Spanish words, but also different local customs (and of course special foods). Being in Benghazi just a year after the revolution, and helping Libya to recover has, of course, been a unique and unrepeatable experience, one perhaps worth a whole different website post at another time...

Looking at the vast number of children worldwide, a surgeon might be tempted to think that there is nothing that can be done, there is no way to solve this problem. I think often, though, of the response of Mother Theresa of Calcutta when someone asked her how she could possibly hope to help so many people. She said, "Well, I can help this one."

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