

## Family Trip to Eldoret: ‘Shock and Awe’

LINDA NICI, MD AND LLOYD FEIT, MD

Dr. Lloyd Feit is a pediatric cardiologist in Providence and is an Associate Professor of Pediatrics at the Alpert Medical School at Brown University. His wife, Dr. Linda Nici, is chief of the Pulmonary and Critical Care section at the Providence VAMC and Clinical Professor of Medicine at Alpert Medical School at Brown University. They traveled to Eldoret with their three children in August 2005.

The term “life-changing experience” is often used rather blithely to describe a myriad of events that occur throughout one’s lifetime. However, we would maintain that bringing three young and impressionable children (7, 11, and 15 years old) to a Third World country to work within its healthcare system is truly an appropriate use of the term.

My husband and I are physicians, a pulmonologist and a pediatric cardiologist respectively, so it seemed logical to volunteer our time to the Brown Kenya Program where our expertise might be valuable. As we contemplated this journey, we also considered how worthwhile it might be to bring our children with us to Kenya. Alyssa, Sara and Benjamin were growing up in a wonderful community but one where wants and needs were easily met and diversity was not the norm. We wanted them to experience a culture that would impress on them the realities of social and economic inequalities and perhaps give them a context upon which to base decisions about how to make their way in the world.

To be sure, the experience changed us more than we could have imagined, and far more than any help and expertise that we intended to bring to their system. Each of us initially reacted to the experience in Eldoret and the Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital with shock and awe – the sights, the smells, the incredible sadness of poorly treated illness, were at times horrific. At the same time, the kindness and humanity of so many of the people we met in the face of such conditions was incredible and inspiring. Lloyd and I spent our days teaching trainees and caring for some of the saddest cases we had ever seen; sad in part because bad outcomes were often related to lack of simple education or modest means. Alyssa, Sara and Ben spent their days in the childcare ward, playing with, caring for, and getting to know the remarkable children, some of whom had been abandoned by their families. They developed an empathy and understanding of a world that is so far away from their own experience, but enriches and informs it to this day.

We regularly recount our experiences, both happy and sad, talk about returning one day, and approach life with a perspective and appreciation that I can’t help but think would not be there without having chosen to spend this time together. Perhaps most importantly, we hope our kids internalized the lessons learned from watching the program directors and founders – Dr. Joe and Sarah Ellen Mamlin. Despite the seemingly constant challenges from ‘the system’ and so many other roadblocks, these people had a vision of change and kept their eyes on the prize. Isn’t that what any parent wants for their children? ❖

## Unique opportunity to assimilate into the Kenyan experience

TOM NOONAN, MD

Tom Noonan is a cardiologist who is a member of the Memorial Hospital Rhode Island Cardiology Group working in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. He and his family traveled to Eldoret in July 2007.

I had the opportunity to visit Eldoret, Kenya, with my wife and four children for the month of July 2007. We were immediately made an integral part of the Brown Kenya Program. I engaged in teaching activities at the Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital, while my wife and children made the long hospital stays of the children in the Sally Test Pediatric Center more enjoyable.

Traveling to Africa is an experience all should enjoy. Our trip, however, allowed us to assimilate into the African culture in a way few others outside of medicine or mission work can understand. My children and I would walk daily to the hospital, stand in large crowds to enter, and shop in the city center. While downtown, they quickly realized the enormity of the crowds and the poverty. They always felt comfortable and wanted by the Kenyan people.

Two years after our trip, we invited a Kenyan whom we had befriended, to come to America for medical training over six weeks and stay in our home. My children came to better understand the difficulties living in Kenya through his eyes. This was a difficult time for him to travel, during the political clashes and violence. Despite this, he knew the opportunity could not be wasted. He explained to my children clearly how important it was to him and his family to fully utilize this opportunity.

Overall, the experience in Eldoret was life changing for all of us. We came to understand that many facets of life in the United States are taken for granted. Fresh water, living conditions, safety of travel (especially at night), personal safety/crime and infectious diseases are all challenges my family came in contact with first-hand. ❖