

A Quest for a Healthy World

Lafayette pediatrician works with others to make a difference

By Diane Claytor



The new Lamorinda chapter of "Boys Team Charity" spent March 1 volunteering with The J.F. Kapnek Trust, transporting over 30 wheelchairs and a full local storage unit of annual donations to the "Container of Love," which was located at the Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church before being sent on its way to Zimbabwe this month. From left: Carey Zimmerman, Connor Peterson, Oliver Feigan, Nick Price, Justin Pratt, Alex Baldwin, Cody Lyon, Mason Loyet, Connor King, and Alex Crum. Photo Carey Zimmerman

Ask parents the world over what they wish for their children and the simple answer is bound to include health. Lafayette's Dr. Daniel Robbins has spent his career working to grant that wish both locally and on a more global level.

As part of the Lamorinda Pedi-

atric team, Robbins has eased the aches and pains of Lamorinda kids for the past 24 years. And as executive director of the J.F. Kapnek Trust for the last 15 years, he's also worked diligently to keep the children of Zimbabwe – more than 10,000 miles away – safe and healthy.

The family trust was started by his great-uncle, James Kapnek, who, living in the African country, became a successful businessman; upon his death, Kapnek left the majority of his fortune in the trust, designating it primarily for education and medical research.

The trust remained in the family and in the early 1980s, Kapnek's niece took the helm, focusing funds on women's health and education. "My aunt reinvigorated the medical community," Robbins explained, "getting medical students from both the States and the region to practice in the more rural areas."

It was at this time that Robbins, then a pediatric resident at Oakland's Children's Hospital, made his first trip to Zimbabwe. "It was an amazing, indelible, life changing experience," he said. "And at the same time, it was extremely painful. Having children die in your arms and knowing that in the States, these beautiful babies would survive, was a very harsh reality for a young pediatric resident. It set the course for me."

When Robbins' aunt passed away, he attended her memorial in Zimbabwe and "was tremendously inspired" as he listened to the Ministers of both Health and Education speak of the significant impact she had made in their country. "I realized there were so many needs there," Robbins said. He saw that babies were dying in large numbers because of the country's HIV/AIDS epidemic and vowed to do what he could to change that. He agreed to the family's request that he take over the trust.

Returning home, Robbins contacted Dr. David Katzenstein, an HIV researcher at Stanford, who "told me that my aunt had actually funded his first trip to Zimbabwe to look at the epidemiology of AIDS there." The two medical professionals connected with others involved in the HIV/AIDS field and created their first proposal for pediatric HIV prevention.

As Robbins explained, "most pediatric HIV comes from mother to child transmission at birth," so we developed the national program, Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission of HIV (PMTCT). "In the last 15 years," Robbins noted, "the program has grown from one small clinic to 850; more than 250,000

women are now tested each year."

When the program began, about 60,000 kids were dying of HIV; it's now less than 10,000. "It's still a huge problem," Robbins admitted, "but we've made great strides."

Another big issue, Robbins stated, is HIV transmission through breast milk. This year The J.F. Kapnek Trust is providing mothers with a more complete drug regimen; this will allow mothers who continue their treatment to be able to safely breastfeed. Robbins believes the transmission rate could potentially drop below 1 percent.

While eliminating pediatric HIV is the primary goal of the trust, it supports several other programs to help the children of Zimbabwe, where both poverty and unemployment rates are very high.

The Preschool Program ensures that approximately 12,000 children attending 150 Kapnek-supported preschools are fed a hot meal each day. "The level of malnutrition has dropped significantly," Robbins said. The trust also supports teacher training, renovates buildings, provides supplies and helps develop the curriculum. "We make sure the kids have materials to work with, well trained teachers, health care check ups and parents who come in to cook every day," he stated.

The trust also offers physical therapy and medical assistance to more than 1,500 children with disabilities in northern Zimbabwe.

Hillary Clinton made famous the ancient African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child." Nowhere is this better illustrated than with the work Robbins and the Kapnek Trust are doing.

The Trust receives funds from both UNICEF and the U.S. Agency for International Development as well as monies from a variety of grants. Needless to say, additional assistance is always needed.

The Trust partners with the Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church and "they have been amazing," Robbins said. "They've helped fill containers with needed supplies, provided money, sent youth groups to Zimbabwe to help paint and refurbish preschools." LOPC's preschoolers have even gotten involved with a pen pal project. Local kids and adults, as well as scout troops, schools and organizations have for years contributed funding, books, soccer equipment, school and medical supplies.

Additionally, the Trust sponsors a Family 5K Run/Walk every year to help raise both awareness and funds. This year's event is at 9 a.m. Sunday, May 4 at Miramonte High School. "There will be a delicious brunch including authentic Zimbabwean 'Sadza' as well as live Zimbabwean music," Robbins said. (For information about the run, visit www.active.com, search for Kapnek.)

"All that we are accomplishing in Zimbabwe is built on the foundation of support from the Lamorinda community," Robbins noted, "and connecting our community with what's happening over there is part of what's great for me."

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Lafayette pediatrician Dan Robbins with some of the mothers and children in Zimbabwe he has helped. Photo provided