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Vacationing families exit the minivan

Americans catch on to volunteering that's worldwide, all ages

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Volunteer vacations can strengthen family bonds and teach children about what life is like in the rest of the world.

In 2005, Susan and Joseph Denman left Portland for El Salvador on a volunteer mission organized by Tigard-based Medical Teams International, formerly known as Northwest Medical Teams.

Joseph, an ophthalmologist, was performing cataract surgery while Susan, a pediatric ophthalmologist, made house calls to people needing care.

The Denmans also took their two teenagers, Margot and Meriwether, with them.

"They helped in surgery," Susan Denman says of her daughters. "When the ophthalmologist needed suture material or instruments, they would go out and find those and bring them in."

Margo and Meriwether, both fluent in Spanish, also helped screen the patients, brought them up for surgery and comforted the patients afterward.

This summer, they will go on their third volunteer trip with their parents.



COURTESY OF PAUL STROMBERG Debi Stromberg plays with local children in the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico, where she and husband Paul, a Portland ophthalmologist, and their three children spend their vacation volunteering with Medical Teams International.

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“It was a great experience,” says Margot Denman, a freshman at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. “It made me think about what I have and how lucky I am.”

EAST COUNTY NEWS

Global perspective instilled

Paul Stromberg, another Portland ophthalmologist who volunteers with Medical Teams International, says, “The life we have in this country is not the way most people live.”



He and his wife, Debi, have taken their children – Joshua, Luke and Stephanie – on volunteer trips to Mexico and Honduras.



“I hope they get a more global perspective of the world and its problems,” Stromberg says. “Not every kid has Nintendo and nice schools that they go to and a house with a roof over their heads.”



“It’s neat for the kids because they get to interact with other kids their age from another culture,” says Kate Hamilton, travel adviser for I-to-I International Projects. I-to-I runs programs in 34 different countries and has a list of 10 one- to two-week trips that are ideal for families.



Hamilton says most program participants come from Europe, where volunteer vacations are more common, but interest is growing in the United States. She estimates that 15 North American families volunteer for I-to-I projects each year.



“It’s a unique breed of family that’s willing to go and spend their time volunteering,” Hamilton says.



The expense of a volunteer vacation varies with family size and destination, though both Hamilton and Stromberg say the final cost was comparable to a family trip to Disneyland.



Not including airfare, Hamilton estimates the average cost of an I-to-I project at \$1,000 and upward. Many organizations offer a discount to children.



Help’s also needed at home



Not all volunteer vacations require travel abroad or foreign language skills.



There are many opportunities here in the United States for families looking to volunteer together during vacation time.

Global Volunteers, overseeing projects in 19 countries across the globe, also offers volunteer opportunities in West Virginia, Mississippi and Minnesota.

On the Blackfeet Reservation in Northwest Montana – just a road trip away for Portland families – Global Volunteers participants construct playgrounds, do landscaping and work in assisted-living facilities and with Blackfeet Community College.

Other opportunities for family volunteering right here in Portland include Habitat for Humanity projects – though volunteers must be at least 14 years of age, in accordance with Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations.

“You don’t have to have any skill or anything,” says Portland Habitat for Humanity Volunteer Coordinator Jennifer Perkins.

Prospective volunteers can register for a project and even complete an online orientation on the organization’s Web site. Volunteers receive on-site training the morning of the project.

Other opportunities can be found through Hands On Greater Portland, which

maintains a searchable list of family-friendly volunteer opportunities on its Web site.

Families should make sure their skills are a good match for the project and that it's something every member of the family will enjoy.

"You have to decide what you want to get out of it, and where you can be the most effective," Susan Denman says.

Given the amount of background work and planning involved, Stromberg suggests partnering with an organization experienced with volunteer vacations. "It would be an extremely difficult thing to do on your own," he says.

Margot Denman is looking forward to returning to El Salvador this summer. She has enjoyed the time with her family and says volunteering has made her more worldly.

"It's a great experience. You don't know what it's like until you try it," she says. "I certainly didn't."

For information about family volunteer vacation opportunities:

- I-to-I Projects International: Programs for Families

1-800-985-4864

www.i-to-i.com/projects/family

- Medical Teams International

503-624-1000

www.medicalteams.org

- Global Volunteers

1-800-487-1074

www.globalvolunteers.org

- Hands On Greater Portland

503-413-7787

www.handsonportland.org

- Portland Habitat for Humanity

503-287-9529

www.pdxhabitat.org

- Willamette West Habitat for

Humanity, Hillsboro

503-844-7606, www.wwhfh.org

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