

Have physio skills and caring heart, will travel

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by CAROLE PEARSON



t's a great profession, says physiotherapist Amanda Bartlett about her job. "You get to work with so many wonderful people as your patients and you can see first hand the magnitude of the effect you can have on their lives."

Amanda Bartlett Physiotherapist Kelowna General Hospital (and beyond)
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Bartlett works in Kelowna General Hospital's rehabilitation wing and has a career she can combine with her love of travel. Last year, she returned from five months of volunteer work in Bhutan and Vietnam. "It really changed my life," she says. "You get so much more than you give. People would invite me to their homes and serve me foods they couldn't really afford. They were so generous."

Bartlett had signed up with Health Volunteers Overseas, an agency which offers short term international postings. Taking a volunteer physiotherapist position, her life long dream to visit the Kingdom of Bhutan was fulfilled. Bartlett had previously visited the Himalayan region but could not enter Bhutan because independent travel is not permitted. This time, her training as a rehabilitation physiotherapist and the volunteer position were her admission ticket. Bartlett arrived in the Bhutanese capital of Thimphu in November 2002.

During her three month stay, she worked at the King's National Referral Hospital, advising the five physiotherapists on staff. In Bhutan, Bartlett found medical care was "quite primitive." She says there is no neurosurgeon in Bhutan and just a tiny ICU with four beds. Infants born with spina bifida are sent to India at four weeks for surgery but they often don't survive because of infection.

One of Bartlett's favourite memories is providing training to teach people with leprosy how to look after their afflictions. "These were people shunned by their families and villages, living in a hospital, and yet the smallest thing would give them such pleasure. I was touched by how keen they were to volunteer so people could learn. They were just happy to be there."

In one of life's serendipitous moments, Bartlett celebrated New Year's Eve in Bhutan with Adrienne Clarkson, Canada's Governor General and her husband, author John Ralston Saul, were there on a private visit. A Canadian ex-pat living in Thimphu invited them to a small dinner party at her home and included five other Canadians staying in Bhutan. Bartlett says Clarkson was very gracious and easy to talk to.

At the end of three months, Bartlett left for a two-month volunteer position at the Da Nang Orthopedic and Rehabilitation Centre in Vietnam. "I arrived during Tet (Vietnamese New Year) and I was met at the airport,

but then everyone disappeared! Left on her own for the holiday, she quickly discovered everything closes for Tet, even the restaurants. For two days, getting food was difficult, but Bartlett says a night watchman at the hospital found some packages of noodles for her.

People were very welcoming, she remembers. Just after I had started working, a sudden staff meeting was called at 7:30 am. I found 60 or so Vietnamese people in this room to welcome me and offer toasts. On the table were packs of cigarettes and bottles of Johnny Walker scotch and Heineken beer. Everyone kept toasting me and I had to drink these vast quantities of alcohol at 7:30 in the morning. She laughs and muses, Maybe we should have something like that here.

Medical care in Vietnam was far more advanced than in Bhutan. In fact, Bartlett says, Their surgical care was quite excellent. The surgeons there were doing stuff the doctors here have difficulty with. Because there are so many kids with cerebral palsy in Vietnam, the surgeons were doing a lot of tendon-lengthening. Often these kids get really tight heel cords or hamstrings because of their prolonged postures and the surgeons were doing beautiful lengthenings. Here, we don't do as many so it's not as tidy, not as good.

One day, Bartlett was taken to the home of a 12-year-old boy with cerebral palsy who was unable to move or speak. Bartlett and an orthopedic and pediatric therapist volunteer from the US worked with the boy. In just one month, he had made great progress. She says, He was able to get around with a walker, which was phenomenal for the short time we worked with him. This was a 12-year-old who had never walked before. He was soon able to enroll in school and taught to use a computer to communicate with others.

This was my best memory, says Bartlett, proudly. This little boy has a future now.

When the two-month volunteer position ended, Bartlett spent time traveling around Cambodia, Laos and Thailand before returning to Canada. Bartlett says it's hard to reconcile the differences between a more materialistic western society and places where people have so little and yet seem more satisfied. In Bhutan and Vietnam, she felt people were genuinely grateful for her assistance. I don't feel as appreciated here, Bartlett says. The patients are appreciative but the government and hospital administration staff are more concerned about budgets and bottom lines.

In 1998, she served on HSA's bargaining committee, and the experience of negotiating with the employer took its toll. She says, I was so completely disillusioned, and this contributed to my leaving the country. I thought, This is my future and this is who my employer is. It was clear the HEABC didn't care about patient outcome or staff in the hospital.

Volunteer experiences may be personally rewarding, but there are significant financial costs and sacrifices. Undeterred, Bartlett says, I met so many wonderful people I would do it again in a heartbeat. I got a real sense of fulfillment from it. The next destinations she has in mind are India or somewhere in South America.

For now, Bartlett wants to give a special mention to the staff in the KGH rehabilitation wing. She says, When the employer gave me my leave of absence to go to Bhutan and Vietnam, I wasn't replaced, so my co-workers had to take an extra load for eight months while I was gone.

None of them complained and there was no resentment and I just want to thank them again for supporting me. They're a great group! 

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