

## FACULTY HIGHLIGHT:

# Dr. Susan Fletcher

CHAMBERLAIN SCHOOL OF NURSING



During a recent trip in Arizona, she was warned before taking route on a “terribly frightening road” near Sedona. Dr. Susan Fletcher just laughed.

Because when you’ve survived multiple treks along the “El Camino de la Muerte” or “Road of Death” in the Andes Mountains, driving your car through a short stretch of the Rockies doesn’t seem like such a daunting task.

“It was a piece of cake!” she said. “The road was asphalted and there was a guardrail.”

Dr. Fletcher and the team of eight Chamberlain students that traveled on a humanitarian mission to Bolivia and the Amazon last fall didn’t enjoy these same protective accommodations. During the 14-day mission where it set up clinics and taught preventative health measures to villagers, the group was forced to travel along a road that kills, on average, one person each day.

“I just have a lot of faith,” said Dr. Fletcher. “I really think that when I go on these trips, God probably goes, ‘Oh, here she’s at it again, send all the angels out.’ I just feel like things will work out.”

They certainly have. For the past 11 years, Dr. Fletcher, an associate professor of nursing at Chamberlain, has taken her love of helping others to all corners of the world, leading teams of Chamberlain students to Mexico, Bolivia, Bangladesh, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

“It has been an admirable program from the beginning,” said Dr. Marty Spies, who just celebrated her 25th year with Deaconess and Chamberlain. “The locations have become more exotic. It is amazing.”

Since Dr. Fletcher led three students to Mexico more than a decade ago, the interest level in her missions has spread throughout the St. Louis campus, with as many as 40 students attending introductory information sessions.

“I’m totally surprised by how far this has come – I’m almost embarrassed,” said Dr. Fletcher, who limits the group to 10 students. “It’s almost like you’re cheating because you love doing something so much and you get credit for it.”

Dr. Fletcher and the Chamberlain students deserve plenty of praise for their tireless efforts. Last August and September, the group traveled to Bolivia and the Amazon in conjunction with Project Helping Hands, a not-for-profit organization that sponsors humanitarian medical teams that travel the world to help those in need.

“Dr. Fletcher is an integral part of Project Helping Hands and an integral part of the students’ education,” said Jeff Solheim, director of the 14-year-old organization.

The group of eight Chamberlain students worked alongside professional practicing nurses and certified doctors from around the United States and set up clinics in remote villages to teach basic health practices, including hand washing, oral hygiene, breast feeding and wearing flip-flops. “There’s no concept of washing your hands or brushing your teeth,” said Chamberlain senior Heather Bowling. “You gave them Tylenol and they thought you were God.”



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For many of these remote villages, these humanitarian missions remain their only access to healthcare.

“The Bolivian government once told us that mortality drops about 50 percent for six months after we leave,” Solheim said.

The villager’s level of appreciation for the mission workers is immeasurable.

“We have so much wealth here that we don’t even think about,” said Dr. Fletcher. “After being in these villages, you see people with one change of clothes, and yet they’re happy and generous and insist that you sit down and eat their food. They want to give you everything they can.”

While the welcome Dr. Fletcher and the Chamberlain students received was overwhelming, often, so were the living conditions for the group. After working in an assembly-line fashion to treat hundreds of patients each day, the team slept on the ground and dined on a steady diet of rice and eggs, if food was available.

“You’re not sitting around playing cards,” said Dr. Fletcher. “You are stressed to the max on these trips. There is always one point in the trip when you just break down or get crabby or start crying, ‘I can’t do this anymore.’”

Bowling understands. As much as she enjoyed helping those in need, she vividly recalls her breaking point.

“I got really sick twice,” she said. “After the second time, I was just done being there.”

As challenging as the environment was for the Chamberlain team, it did not come as a surprise – Dr. Fletcher prepares the students for the trip’s stresses with a comprehensive orientation program. Along with fundraising efforts to help pay for the trip (Chamberlain has paid for Dr. Fletcher’s trip for the past two years) and immunizations for yellow fever, typhoid and malaria, the group discusses the political climate and potential dangers of their destination, along with the stresses they may encounter following the mission.

“It was really tough,” Bowling said of her return. “I work in a hospital where these people are put in nice hospitals beds and they



get three full meals per day. They’re getting the best medical treatment yet they can treat you like dirt. It’s hard to come back to that. You want to look at them and say, ‘you have it good.’”

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For Jeremy Yates, the only male Chamberlain student on the trip, his return was not as stressful.



“I ended up taking a month off,” said Yates, who works in a small community hospital with about 200 beds. “By the time I came back to work, I was ready to go and I was the happiest that I had been in awhile.”

Before the team departs, Dr. Fletcher also holds an informational meeting for family members to ask questions and voice their concerns.

“My family hated it,” Bowling said. “My mother was still trying to talk me out of it going to the airport. They didn’t tell my grandma until I was gone. She wouldn’t have been very happy.”

But both Bowling and Yates didn’t hesitate to say ‘yes’ when asked, if given the chance, would they return. Yates’ experience with Dr. Fletcher was so positive that he’s planning a return trip to Bolivia or possibly a Kenyan mission following graduation.

“Dr. Fletcher was pretty cool to work with,” he said. “I don’t think they could have sent a better instructor. She was so easy to work with. She was relaxed and understanding and it made it easy for me to jump in and help. I didn’t feel like a student on the trip.”

Dr. Susan Fletcher’s dedication to her students and her ability to help them prepare for the road ahead is unquestioned.

Another example of how DeVry is “Doing well by doing good.”