

MOUNTAIN CAUSES: DOCTORS LAUNCH MAMA MAISHA TO HELP AFRICAN MOTHERS

BETH WALTON, *Asheville Citizen-Times*, November 28, 2016



Dr. Reta Graham, an OB-GYN doctor at the Mountain Area Health Education Center, holds a baby in the Mara region of Tanzania. Together with her husband, Dr. Jeffery Graham, the two have started Mama Maisha, a nonprofit organization aimed at reducing maternal mortality. Both doctors are graduates of the Mountain Area Health Education Center. (Photo: Courtesy of Mama Maisha)

ASHEVILLE - There has been a lot of talk lately about making America great again, and there is nothing like living outside the confines of the United States' borders to see what makes this country so special.

I had the privilege to serve overseas for three years in the United States Peace Corps before coming to the Asheville Citizen-Times, and the people I met while working in Kazakhstan and Rwanda spoke fondly of America and its support of their country's development.

Many of them would not have survived if it hadn't been for international assistance dollars from the U.S.

Government, religious and nonsecular groups were providing their villages with medicine to meet immediate needs and supporting infrastructure projects so that one day it wouldn't take an entire day to get to a hospital less than 20 miles away.

To them our American flag meant progress, and every time a shipment of supplies came to our health center in Rwanda with a USAID stamp on it, my heart swelled momentarily with pride.

Last week I was reminded once again of this country's generosity as I shared coffee with doctors Reta and Jeffery Graham of Asheville.

The two area physicians are striving to make sure mothers no longer die from childbirth in Tanzania, an East African nation most commonly known for its wild animals living in the Serengeti National Park.

Yet, among the country's vast wilderness are an estimated 49.2 million people, many with limited access to health care. There, women are dying during childbirth every day.

That, according to Dr. Reta Graham, an OB-GYN at Mountain Area Health Education Center, is unacceptable.

Graham and her husband launched Mama Maisha, in the Mara region of Tanzania in 2013, after first being exposed to international public health work in Indonesia. They became an official nonprofit one year later.

The two met in medical school at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences and later went to MAHEC to further their careers.

After spending time overseas, they decided to return to Asheville in part because of the community that chooses to make these mountains home.

Asheville is a place that is supportive of human rights and social justice, said Reta Graham. "It supports women and women's empowerment," she said. "This community values equality and a lot of people here have lived in places other than the U.S."

In just one year, local support for Mama Maisha, an organization with a Swahili name meaning Mother Life, has allowed three more villages to receive help, said Jeffery Graham, a physician at The Family Health Centers.

The nonprofit is hosting its annual Safe Motherhood event and auction 7-10 p.m. Dec. 2 at the Lexington Avenue Brewery. The public is invited.

Local fundraising supports the training and employment of 15 community-based maternal health workers and five permanent staff, serving between 1,300 and 1,500 people a year.

Mama Maisha's maternal health workers provide prenatal care and delivery services, alongside education and resources, he said.

Health workers organize community groups where people can discuss family planning, HIV/AIDS and childbirth among their peers, building accountability and community resiliency.

The hope is to empower women to make wise decisions regarding family planning, healthy pregnancies, and safe delivery, said Reta Graham.

As Mama Maisha has grown, the rate of health center deliveries among its clients as opposed to more dangerous home births has increased to 52 percent, higher than the regional average of 30.4 percent, she said.

"Mama Maisha presents the importance of healthy pregnancy, safe delivery, and family planning as three pillars to preventing loss of life," Reta Graham said. "In areas where many families live on \$1 to \$2 per day, the maternal health workers are the voices that rise above all others when a woman's life is at risk."

The first day the OB-GYN performed surgery at the Shirati Hospital during a visit to Tanzania, the doctor delivered two premature babies by Cesarean-section. Both the infants died, and the mothers were lucky to make it through surgery.

It was a stark reminder that pregnancy and childbirth can be life threatening, especially in places where access to skilled medical professionals is limited, Reta Graham said.

Maternal death is one of the largest health care disparities facing the developing world, she said.

"In developed countries like the U.S.A., maternal death is rare.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, a woman has a 1 in 39 lifetime risk of dying during her reproductive years due to pregnancy-related causes. That number is 100 times higher than a woman in the developed world," Reta Graham said.

"Mama Maisha brings a simple message: maternal death is more than a health issue, more than an economic or cultural problem, it is a violation of a woman's most basic human rights."

There is no doubt in my mind that as people sat around their Thanksgiving tables last week they came up with all sorts of things that make America great — the food we eat, the homes we have, and most importantly the people who are around us.

I think one of the things that makes America so great is people like Reta and Jeffery Graham. Not only are they giving back, but they are inspiring others to see beyond our borders.

The United States was founded on the premise that it would be a refuge for the poor, the tired and the huddled masses seeking freedom from persecution.

As we look inward as a nation during the next four years, let's not forget the reasons why it's also important to look out. Let's not forget the people who still need our help.

This is the opinion of Beth Walton. Each month a Citizen-Times reporter volunteers around Asheville and shares their adventure with our readers. If you'd like us to visit your group, contact Walton at bwalton@citizen-times.com or 828-232-5851. More at www.citizen-times.com/mountaincauses.

GET INVOLVED

Mama Maisha is always in need of volunteers and support. Contact the Reta or Jeffery Graham at contact@mamamaisha.org or www.mamamaisha.org to learn more. The nonprofit is hosting its annual Safe Motherhood event and auction from 7-10 p.m. Dec. 2 at the Lexington Avenue Brewery, 39 N Lexington Ave. The public is invited.