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Living his dream: Doctor fights tropical diseases in Africa, Americas

By Robert Joiner, Beacon staff

Dr. Frank O. Richards Jr. has practiced medicine in places where flying bullets and kidnappings are as common as the tropical diseases he wants to eradicate.

His medical and public health expertise took him to Guatemala in the late 1980s, when a guerrilla war was in full swing. He found himself doing similar work in Sudan while fighting between the north and south was splitting the country apart. He also happened to be in Nigeria last August when an Islamist group, called Boko Haram, bombed the United Nations headquarters where Richards had attended a meeting the day before.

“By the way we arranged our schedules and by the grace of God, we weren’t in the U.N. building,” he says, adding that running into civil strife can be “part of the job.”

The job is a kind of war itself, one in which he is using the weapons of medicine and education in what should be a winnable fight against disease in Africa and the Americas. His upbringing didn’t exactly prepare him for this work, having grown up in a comfortable University City home. He might have aspired to become a surgeon, like his father, or at least practice some other line of medicine in safer surroundings.

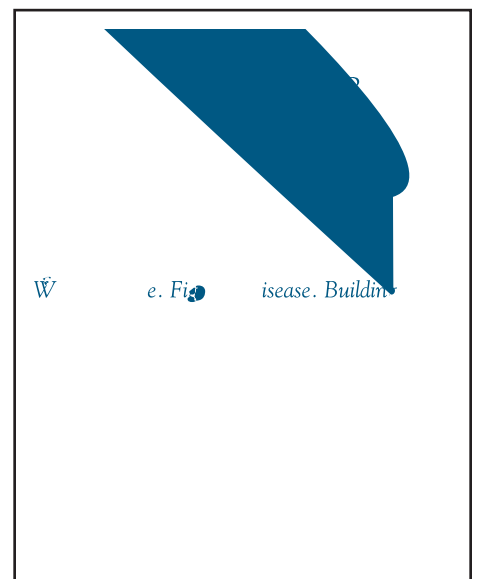
That might have been an option before he went to Cornell Medical School and got hooked on tropical medicine. The decision led him first to 20 years of service at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and finally to the Carter Center, both in Atlanta. He directs the center’s programs to conquer malaria,

river blindness and two other debilitating diseases. One is schistosomiasis, commonly known as snail fever, a water-borne parasitic infection that harms internal organs. The other is lymphatic filariasis, which is transmitted by mosquitoes and can cause grotesque swelling in the legs.

Eradicating river blindness

“I am living my dream right now,” Richards says of his work, recalling the period about 25 years ago when he was naive enough to believe it was possible to make major strides toward conquering river blindness, particularly in Guatemala. He was elated last November when the Carter Center announced that Guatemala, and Mexico as well, had broken the transmission cycle of river blindness.

Their success was due in no small way to a medicine called Mectizan, donated by Merck, and backing from the Carter



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