

# Caring

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## for those in need

Edited by Karen Carlson • Photograph by James Hawker

*Susan Nagele, M.D., '81, may be the only SIU alumnus who can speak Kiswahili, Juba Arabic and Toposa.*

*For more than 20 years, Dr. Nagele has provided medical care in Africa, starting health centers, dispensaries and primary health programs in places where she usually is the only physician. Originally from Urbana, Ill., she lives in Kiminini, Kenya, serving 200,000 people in the expanded area in Western Kenya, near the Ugandan border.*

*She has received much recognition for her work serving those in need. She was the SIU School of Medicine Distinguished Alumna in 1996. Her work was featured in a 1999 ABC "Nightline" segment on Sudan. She received the Inspiring Women Alumna Achievement Award from the SIU Foundation in 2006.*

*For her most recent honor last autumn, Dr. Nagele received the President's Award from the Illinois Academy of Family Physicians.*



Susan returned to SIU in 2006 for her class' 25th reunion.

### ***When did you know you wanted to do this work?***

In college I volunteered to work in Appalachia on holidays and I went to Nicaragua with a vaccination program, *Amigos de las Americas* after my junior year. In medical school, I volunteered for two weeks in the Dominican Republic with the Christian Medical and Dental Society. I felt I gained much more than I gave in these short programs and wanted to do something more long term so that I would have the opportunity to learn language and culture and be able to give something more in return. Initially I wanted to go for three to six years, and the best time to go was after my residency when I didn't have a private practice, patients, and overhead to keep up. I knew in the back of my mind from the

beginning that I might stay longer and this is what gradually developed. I have a facility for learning languages, and I enjoy the challenges different cultures bring to providing health care.

### ***What's your typical day like?***

I work in a 32-bed hospital with two physician assistants from Monday to Thursday 8:30am-5pm. We see 30-50 patients per day and have 15-20 patients in the hospital on average. On Fridays I do clinics at smaller units in the area. Our hospital provides deliveries including vacuum extractions, oxytocin induction/augmentation, and ultrasound. We refer patients needing C-sections or major surgery. We also provide minor surgery including uterine evacuations for incomplete abortions, suturing, circumci-

sions, arthrocentesis, paracentesis, LP, burn care, wound debridement and biopsy/excision of small lesions. Specimens for histopathology have to be sent to Nairobi, 250 miles away. We have a good lab which can do malaria smears, CBC, urinalysis, ESR, pregnancy testing, gram and AFB stains, SGPT, creatinine, HBsAg, VDRL and screening for HIV/AIDS. We cannot do cultures. We do not have x-ray. We have clinics for maternal and child health on Wednesday, antenatal clinics on Tuesdays and Thursdays and clinic for hypertension and diabetes on Fridays. We have also worked with the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission to provide medical assessment and treatment for victims of sexual assault. This is a huge problem as there is a lot of incest and abuse of alcohol and

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drugs. Culturally, women are not respected as individuals with rights so it is not seen as a crime. Many women are poor and brew beer to earn money. Their daughters are sent to sell the beer and are raped in the process.

### *Could you briefly describe a patient experience that has meant a lot to you?*

In Tanzania I had a little girl, Linet, abandoned by her mother, who had measles and cancrum oris (a gangrenous disease that destroys facial tissue). A huge hole was left in her cheek when I debrided the necrotic tissue. At that time we had two or three children literally suffocating to death each day with measles. I had never seen a case of either of these diseases in my training. Linet survived and a woman in the village who could not have children herself agreed to take care of her as her own child. There were days when I didn't think I could watch one more child die, and I worked very hard to get the vaccination program up and running. In three years, we had no more deaths from measles and Linet had a good and generous woman to take care of her.

### *What have these people come to mean to you?*

These are people of tremendous courage and fortitude. My difficulties in life never come close to what they have had to endure.

### *What is your proudest accomplishment to date?*

Teaching. When I see one of the health-care workers using some knowledge or skill I've taught them to help someone else, I am very happy. One nurse who worked with me for three years went to southern Sudan for six months and did very well serving people who were very sick. Many nurses have to function as doctors here, and I will teach them as

much as they are capable of learning. I have also been supervising Kenyan family medicine residents since 2007. They come to our hospital to do one to two months of community medicine. In general, these are bright, young doctors who want to provide good quality care and learn how to serve their communities better. They often don't have the basic things needed in government hospitals (needles, syringes, IV fluids). They come to our place and have the equipment they need and a staff that tries to work together for the welfare of those who are sick and especially those who are poor.

### *What is the state of Kenya today?*

Kenya is struggling to get the economy working after massive presidential post-election violence in January to March 2008. Inflation is 26 percent, and there is a looming famine because the farmers couldn't plant as usual. Many were displaced from their farms in March when the planting season started. The cost of fertilizer and other inputs has skyrocketed, so many didn't have the money to plant as much as usual. The coalition government between the former president and the opposition prime minister is shaky, and the president recently signed a bill to severely curtail freedom of the press. Corruption is rampant, and the teachers are threatening to go on strike for higher salaries later in the month.

### *You are active in women's rights. Describe the conditions for women.*

Kenya passed a Sexual Offense Bill in 2007, and it is a good legal framework to begin to protect women's rights. Culturally, women are still regarded as property for which dowry is paid at the time of marriage in rural areas. Female genital mutilation has been outlawed but is still widely practiced in rural areas. Slowly, women are accessing education and learning to respect themselves. Even more slowly, younger men are learning to

respect women and to work with them. Last week, I brought my neighbor to the hospital because her husband was drunk and beat her up. But the next patient I saw was a child accompanied by both his mother and father and it was the father carrying the child and asking most of the questions. This is the new generation who will help to improve the lives of women and families for the better.

### *What does the future hold for you?*

I have been at this hospital for over five years now and plan to move to another ministry in October of this year. My expertise is in tropical medicine, and I love pediatrics and obstetrics. There is a huge need for health-care professionals here and given that I can speak Kiswahili, Juba Arabic and Toposa, I have a lot to offer these communities. I would foresee continuing to work in East Africa until I retire.

### *How well did SIU prepare you for this work?*

Very well. SIU gave me a great foundational education to build on. Family medicine gave me the breadth of knowledge I need, as I don't often have specialists to refer to. It taught me how to solve problems. It also taught me good communications skills and cultural sensitivity. The first Arabic-speaking woman I treated was in Carbondale, not Sudan.

### *What have you learned, either professionally or personally from your experiences?*

I still have a lot to learn, but I have much to offer. The important thing is to keep learning and keep growing. Whatever I do, I do it with love.

### *What compromises have you made to do this work?*

I will never have a family of my own, and I have lived very far away from my own family. But if it wasn't worth it, I would have left a long time ago. ●●●