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Children in Need: Pediatrician Kim Mukerjee '06 finds her calling treating immigrant community in New Orleans

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Children in Need

Pediatrician Kim Mukerjee '06 finds her calling treating immigrant community in New Orleans

By Helen Freund | Photography by Chris Granger

Despite soaring summer temperatures and a rickety Winnebago doubling as a mobile health clinic, Dr. Kimberly Mukerjee '06 knew she had fallen hard for the city of New Orleans.

Together with a team of budding pediatricians in residency like herself, the group would pack into the RV and drive out to the suburbs of Kenner, La., an area that is home to many Central American immigrants and refugees, many of whom were children and in desperate need of basic health care.

"It was August and the generator kept going off and it was sweltering, but it didn't affect the team," Mukerjee recalled. "We just kept on going because we were there for the families. I had never been exposed to that before. It was a level of dedication that struck me—within our own team and the program—that really spoke to me to stay."

She had recently graduated from medical school at the University of Washington with a combined M.D. and master's degree in public health, and was applying to residency programs. For Mukerjee, the Crescent City stood out. "There was an overall sense of, 'We're here to work for and with the community,' that I didn't sense anywhere else."

Four years later, Mukerjee is faculty at the Tulane University Department of Pediatrics and the director of immigrant and refugee health at the



New Orleans Children's Health Project, a program formed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Mukerjee's focus is to provide medical care to immigrant refugee children throughout the greater New Orleans area, a region that is increasingly becoming a hub for Central American migration.

Much of her work consists of visiting clinical sites in underserved areas of the city where Mukerjee meets with and treats immigrant refugee children, many of whom have never seen a doctor before and often have undiagnosed medical conditions.

Mukerjee is a fluent Spanish speaker, a skill she gained from Colby Spanish professor emerita and mentor Barbara Nelson. "She was an incredibly inspiring person who really pushed me well beyond my comfort zone and literally into the world," she said. "The fact that she was able to push me into something that ended up becoming such a love and such a passion—I give a lot of credit to her for that."

The vast majority of the children Mukerjee sees are refugees from Honduras, many of whom are fleeing dire economic situations and a country rife with gang violence and political instability. Most of the children weren't born in the United States and therefore aren't eligible for Medicaid or financial assistance in the state of Louisiana.

"One of the reasons I went into medicine was to work in underserved areas. In New Orleans, you realize more and more what global health is, and it really is right here, at home: working with low-resource communities, giving back to a community that has needs."



"I was so enthralled with the resilience of these kids," Mukerjee said, recalling a boy who fled Honduras after seeing his grandfather executed by gang members. Having witnessed the slaying, he too, became a target.

Then there was the young mother who arrived in New Orleans with no money or family ties, and a young daughter with Down syndrome that had never been diagnosed or treated.

The work is challenging, and not just on a physical level. Dealing with children who have suffered unspeakable atrocities and have often been victims and witnesses to physical violence can take its toll. "I still haven't learned how to cope completely," Mukerjee said. "But I believe it's important to do self-care. It's emotionally overwhelming, and I often can't separate myself from the heavy stories when I go home at the end of the day."

To cope, Mukerjee takes walk through oak tree-lined Audubon Park or gets together with friends. Her closest network is still her Colby peers, and sometimes just hopping on the phone for a few minutes helps to bring things back into perspective, she said.

And then it's back to work for Mukerjee, who lives in the Carrollton area. "One of the reasons I went into medicine was to work in underserved areas. In New Orleans, you realize more and more what global health is, and it really is right here, at home: working with low-resource communities, giving back to a community that has need.

"When we were on that mobile clinic that was breaking down, I just remember thinking, 'Nowhere else would I have this opportunity.'"



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Pediatrician Kim Mukerjee '06 is director of immigrant and refugee health at the New Orleans Children's Health Project, a program formed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina to help bring medical care to the city's most vulnerable children in need. Most of the children Mukerjee sees are refugees from Honduras who are fleeing economic hardship and a country rife with gang violence and political instability. Many of them have never seen a doctor.

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