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Bigger Picture: Mieko McKay Works for the Health of a Continent

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BiggerPicture

Mieko McKay works for the health of a continent

At one time Mieko McKay '01 planned to study medicine at Baylor University near her home in Amarillo, become a physician, and help people one patient at a time. Instead she opted to come east for college—and now her “patients” are spread over entire African countries.

McKay is senior program officer for Save the Children, overseeing women’s and children’s health programs in Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Tanzania, and working on Ebola management in Guinea. It’s a tremendous responsibility and the latest stop in a journey that began with McKay’s eye-opening discovery of anthropology at Colby.

That led to a year studying abroad in Durban, South Africa, which offered a course in epidemiology (“It was like being a health detective”), which led to two years in the Peace Corps doing women’s health in Senegal, which led to a master’s in public health from Johns Hopkins University, which led to a succession of positions working on health-care programs in South Africa, Uganda, Rwanda, Guinea, eastern Congo, and Mali. “If I hadn’t gone to Colby I’d probably be a doctor in Texas right now,” said McKay.

She spoke from Bamako, Mali’s capital, where she was directing Save the Children’s community health-care programs. The West Africa Ebola outbreak had put Mali in the news, after

it surfaced in an eastern region called Kayes. McKay said she was concerned about Mali because in many ways it was not ready for the large-scale epidemic seen in neighboring Guinea and Liberia.

Previously McKay spent five years working on projects aimed at assisting women suffering from obstetric fistula, a persistent problem in East Africa, West Africa, and other developing areas. “It’s not as abstract as family planning,” she said. “With a fistula program, you see the successes right away.”

McKay is used to working toward long-term change, too. In the Peace Corps in Senegal, she and colleagues organized a bicycle tour for girls. They would stop in small villages and speak about women’s health and family planning. First McKay and her colleagues had to teach the girls how to ride bicycles, a skill that was typically reserved for boys and men. By the end of the tour, the girls were gaining confidence and speaking out about “the desire to be educated, the desire to decide when they would be married—and not necessarily at the age of twelve,” McKay said.

“Women’s rights is the most striking aspect of the work that I do. The basic rights that I, as a woman in the U.S., take for granted are not widely available—in a lot of the world, not just Africa.” —Gerry Boyle '78

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—Mieko McKay '01

Photo by Forrest MacCormack