

# OFFERING HEALTH AND HOPE IN WEST AFRICA

< By Melanie Mullinax >

**M**arina Rivera is a retired U.S. Army radiographer from Colorado who has worked on some of the most advanced radiography equipment available. But for two weeks recently, Rivera left behind the modern techniques of digital radiology to participate in a health education mission as a Project HOPE volunteer in Monrovia, Liberia. When she walked into the radiology department of the John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital, she was shocked. "It was like stepping back in time 30 or more years," she said. "Most of the equipment was inoperable. The technicians were using a portable X-ray machine and they were developing films manually." She had barely finished introducing herself to her Liberian counterparts when a trauma patient was rushed in needing an immediate head X-ray.

Rivera, was part of a joint mission between Project HOPE, an international health education and humanitarian assistance organization, and the U.S. Navy, as well as private corporate partners that worked together to bring health assistance to the people of West Africa. The public-private partnership sent 40 medical volunteers to Ghana and Liberia during the total six-week mission, providing medical treatment to more than 1,200 patients, conducting training for nearly 700 local health care professionals, and delivering \$4.5 million worth of humanitarian aid in the form of medicines and medical supplies to the two countries.

Despite the circumstances, the stifling hot working conditions, and lines of people waiting for treatment in the dark stuffy hallways, Rivera and the others at JFK Memorial Hospital found an eager staff ready to learn and improve their medical skills. The volunteers offered classes in burn trauma, newborn resuscitation, gestational age training, and pediatric and newborn assessment to name a few.

Working side-by-side her counterparts, Rivera's training was all hands-on as she



*Project HOPE volunteer with pacemaker patient.*

and the JFK Memorial Hospital staff X-rayed up to 50 patients a day. She taught the staff about adjusting technical settings for each individual patient to produce better X-rays. She also offered simple, practical advice to the staff.

ExxonMobil Foundation, a long time supporter of Project HOPE's health education programs helped underwrite the mission to West Africa. "We were pleased to join with the U.S. Navy and Project Hope to help bring much needed medical services and supplies to West Africa," said Gerald W. McElvy, President of the ExxonMobil Foundation. "The mission to West Africa is an excellent example of an effective partnership to help address some of the serious health care challenges in Africa."

In addition to four weeks of help in Liberia, volunteers from HOPE and their partners provided two weeks of care, health education and humanitarian aid in Ghana. Working with the U.S. Navy as part of the Africa Partnership Station, volunteers conducted some of their training onboard the USS Swift and helped supply a clinic built by the U.S. military in Ghana.

These joint missions also provide opportunities for strengthening relationships. During a ceremony held in March to thank Project HOPE, the U.S. Navy and other partners for their lifesaving gifts of medicines, medical supplies, and health education that will benefit the

country in the long-term, Liberian President, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf said, "This is a different kind of a vessel [the USS Swift], a vessel with soldiers no doubt as we see them all dressed in their attire. But a vessel that brings hope building upon the Project HOPE, a vessel that brings service, a vessel with people who also join our people in sacrificial service to those who need that service most. We want to extend to each and every one of you our hand of friendship and gratitude for what you've done in coming to join us and responding to the needs of our people."

But those receiving care are not the only ones that feel grateful. "These missions are life-changing experiences for all involved - Navy personnel, volunteers, and corporate partners - because they see and hear first-hand how they can make a difference in the health of those who otherwise may not be able to receive care," said John P. Howe, III, M.D., president and CEO of Project HOPE. "Even if it's as simple as giving a vaccine or training local health workers how to give an infant CPR, these volunteers and corporate partners are helping prevent a disease or save a child's life." ●

*Melanie Mullinax is a communication specialist for Project HOPE. In April, she spent two weeks with medical volunteers at the John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Monrovia, Liberia. For more information, please visit [www.projecthope.org](http://www.projecthope.org)*