Miller School Graduate Gives Back to Her Adopted Bahamas

From her home in St. Louis, Tara Conway Copper, M.D., watched news reports of Hurricane Dorian barrel ing across the Atlantic Ocean toward the Bahamas and a possible Florida landfall.

From left, Tara Conway Copper, M.D., with Evette Thimothee, M.D., of Nassau at the Marsh Harbour Healthcare Centre on Great Abaco Island.

Her parents, John and Maureen Conway, were hunkered down in Nassau on New Providence Island. Her younger sister, Jena Conway, was in Fort Lauderdale. When Dorian hit the northern islands of the Bahamas and stalled over Grand Bahama Island and Great Abaco Island, battering the islands with winds peaking at 185 mph, a huge storm surge, and unpredictable tornadoes, Dr. Copper wondered how the people there would survive.

“I just couldn’t fathom what it must have been like on the ground,” she said.

Dr. Copper, an assistant professor of pediatrics at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis who works in the emergency room at the St. Louis Children’s Hospital, is in the Bahamas now, spending a week helping out at the Marsh Harbour Healthcare Centre in the heart of Great Abaco Island. She is the first Miller School of Medicine graduate to be part of a
rotation of University of Miami physicians spending weeklong stints at the clinic to help doctors there provide treatment to local residents returning to the stricken island.

Before attending the University of Florida for her undergraduate studies, Dr. Copper lived and went to high school in Nassau for two years in the late 1990s, and her parents still call the Bahamas home.

“The Bahamas have been warm and welcoming to me and my family since we first came here in 1997,” she said. “It was a no brainer that I had to figure out a way to get back here and help the people after Dorian.”

After the storm hit the Bahamas on September 1, Dr. Copper shared relief agency websites with Washington University colleagues who wanted to donate to recovery efforts. She reached out to her family and friends in Nassau, trying unsuccessfully to find someone who could connect her with volunteer efforts on the ground.

“I felt my hands were a little bit tied and that I couldn’t find a way in,” she said.

She found the way last month when she checked the Miller School Facebook page to get information about her 10-year reunion. There, she saw a post by classmate Elizabeth Greig, M.D., assistant professor of medicine at the Miller School, who was asking if anyone was interested in volunteering in Marsh Harbour.

Dr. Greig and Barth A. Green, M.D., executive dean for global health and community service at the Miller School, have spearheaded efforts to help in the Bahamas and have been
working closely over the past four months with the Bahamas Ministry of Health to coordinate resources.

Dr. Copper is the sixth physician associated with the University to volunteer at Marsh Harbour, and three more physicians will deploy next week.

“The Bahamian workforce is still depleted, housing remains a critical issue, and the University of Miami volunteers are helping to offset some of the burden on the Ministry of Health so they can regroup and put together a working plan for the Abacos health care workforce that will be sustainable long term without outside assistance,” Dr. Greig said.

When Dr. Copper arrived in Marsh Harbour on January 1, it was her first visit to the town. She was struck by the devastation on the island, which is facing a herculean effort to rebuild.

“Every single building I saw was severely damaged,” she said. “It just seemed so upside down.”

At the Marsh Harbour Healthcare Centre, Dr. Copper has been working the overnight shift, treating a steady stream of patients for various ailments, including ear and skin infections, congestive heart failure, and hypertension, as well as mental health conditions, including depression and schizophrenia. With the holiday season concluded, the medical team expects to begin treating patients with construction injuries as workers return to assist in the rebuild.

Dr. Greig said the number of patients coming to the clinic is the highest it has been since before the hurricane as more and more people return. UM and the Ministry of Health are working on a long-term strategy for a recovery and rebuild that
involves not only the Miller School, but also the School of Nursing and Health Studies, School of Architecture, and College of Engineering, she noted. Additional alumni volunteers will be sought to help fill staffing needs.

Dr. Copper, who will be at the clinic until January 9, called her experience there inspiring.

“I’m just in awe of the team and their work ethic,” she said. “Many of them are on their second or third tour of duty at the clinic. I feel blessed to be able to offer a skill set that is needed.”

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