

Dr. O. Gordon Robinson, BA'53

When Dr. O. Gordon Robinson, an established plastic and reconstructive surgeon in Birmingham, Ala., saw his 50th birthday on the horizon, he started a to-do list.

"One of the things I wrote down was 'plastic surgery in the Third World,'" says Robinson, who specializes in pediatric burn treatment and cleft lip and palate surgery. He signed up with the Christian Medical Society, which sent him on several trips to Coyoles, Honduras, a remote, impoverished town where the Dole Food Co. (then known as Standard Fruit) runs a 17,000-acre banana farm.

Robinson fell in love with Coyoles. No other medical aid organizations had a presence there. There was a tiny hospital—not much more than a clinic compared to what might be found in the United States—and a big need. After his two-year arrangement with the medical society ended, Robinson decided to start his own small operation, so he began looking for a site.

"I flew all around the Caribbean in my Cessna looking for a place," Robinson says. "I went to several, but I always ended up back in this little village. I think you bloom where you're planted, and that's where we got planted."

Robinson's work in Coyoles has continued to bloom for nearly 30 years. He takes a team two or three times a year for about 10 days per trip. When he started, the teams were small: Robinson; his wife, Kitty; a nurse and another doctor. Now he takes up to 12 people, including several nurses and doctors. He estimates they've performed more than 4,000 surgeries, mostly on children.

"Now we average about 80 general anesthetics a trip, and about 30 cleft palate surgeries," Robinson says. "We take care of

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For nearly 30 years cosmetic surgeon O. Gordon Robinson has traveled regularly to Coyoles, Honduras, leading a team of medical volunteers who perform cleft lip, cleft palate and hand surgeries, and treat burns, cuts and other injuries for the impoverished people of that town.

a lot of burns and cuts from machete fights, and we do a lot of hand surgery. They cook on charcoal clay stoves, and the children have no supervision whatsoever, and they get burned."

Robinson's team also arranges a clinic day during the trip when as many as 300 people come for general-practice care. The patients often receive supplies along with their medical treatment. "We give them toothbrushes, toothpaste. We had a little boy—he and his mother walked for about six hours to reach us. We fixed his eye and gave him shoes."

In short, when Robinson sees a need, he acts to fill it. In 1981 he set up a private foundation to solicit medical supplies, equipment and shipping services for his Coyoles work. In the early 1990s, using mostly their own money, the Robinsons built and equipped a surgical addition to the small Coyoles hospital for two operating rooms and a recovery room. When Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras in 1998, Robinson rounded up planes, including two C-130s through one of Alabama's U.S. senators, to carry 1 million pounds of food and supplies and two airplane loads of medicine to the area.

"In Honduras we ran into a Canadian MASH unit with two helicopters and no medicine, so we hooked up with them," Robinson recalls. "And we went to two villages a day that were wiped out in the hurricane."

Now in his late 70s, Robinson thinks about retiring, but it's not going so well. He made an attempt five years ago, leaving Birmingham to live southeast of the city on a spread near Alexander City, but he's back to a four-day work week as a cosmetic surgeon. In September he took another team to Coyoles. Nevertheless, Robinson eventually plans to hand over his Coyoles operations to doctors from the University of Alabama, while staying involved on the administrative side.

In the meantime, what about the other items on his decades-old to-do list?

"You know, I can't remember the other nine," Robinson says, and he bursts out laughing.

Find out more: www.therobinsonfoundation.com

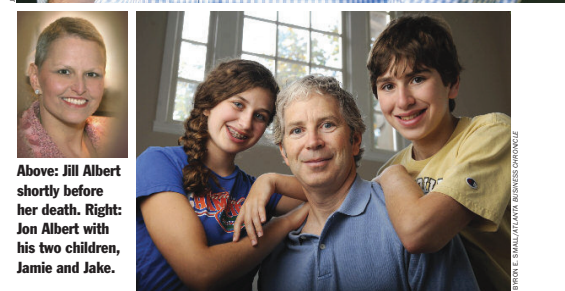
Jon Albert, BA'84

Jill Albert was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer when her two children were still in elementary school.

"Her biggest fear was that they would forget her," says Jon Albert, her husband. "For parents facing late-stage cancer, there's tremendous dread, tremendous guilt. You can take drugs to mask the physical pain, but you dread missing the milestones."

Jill died in November 2006, two weeks after sharing with her family the kickoff celebration for the Jack & Jill Late Stage Cancer Foundation, founded by Jon to help families like theirs create memories that would outlast cancer. Her son was 13 years old, and her daughter was 11.

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Above: Jill Albert shortly before her death. Right: Jon Albert with his two children, Jamie and Jake.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JACK & JILL LATE STAGE CANCER FOUNDATION

The Jack & Jill Late Stage Cancer Foundation provides dream vacations—the foundation calls them WOW! Experiences®—for families with a parent who has terminal cancer. Above, the Comeau, Magras and Canady families enjoy their vacations together. “Most of the moms and dads the foundation ‘treats’ die within two to five months after their WOW! Experience,” says foundation founder Jon Albert. “This time as a family is meaningful, tangible and indispensable. Our supporters are giving these families a cherished timeout together, while they still can. What a gift.”

The Atlanta-based foundation arranges for families battling late-stage cancer to go on weeklong vacations—the foundation calls them WOW! Experiences®—designed to help them escape the day-to-day and focus on enjoying each other. Many families travel out of town for this week, but those who need to stay close to home, typically for medical reasons, receive the same pampering, with special activities, hotels, transportation and meals provided. All participating families are referred to Jack & Jill by an oncologists’ network that Jon continues to expand.

The week’s goal is twofold: to allow the nuclear family some protected time together, and to help the children cope with the scary reality they face.

“It’s sad and cruel when a child must watch a parent deteriorate and die,” Jon says. “When cancer strikes, the focus is on the patient. Nothing else is ever the same. The vacations, the weekends, the holidays aren’t the same. And as much as a 9-year-old can understand, it’s hard to accept that you can’t be a normal kid. So we focus on the children.”

This, Jon says, helps the parents, too. “When you get to late-stage cancer, you don’t give up. My wife was parasailing four months before she died. You want to be there for your kids.”

Jon’s idea for the foundation was informed by conversations he had with others in his family’s situation.

“When you’re going through treatment with your wife, she’s in and out of chemo, in and out of radiation. You meet other parents,” Jon says. “Despite advances in research, thousands of parents in their 20s and 30s die every year from cancer.”

Jon approached his idea with deliberate skepticism.

“I played devil’s advocate in the oncology community, with families and doctors,” Jon explains. “I said, ‘I’m not going to save anyone’s life. There are some people out there who don’t have enough money to drive their car to chemo or to put food on the table. There are more pressing concerns.’ But everybody said, ‘You’ve got to do this.’”

Establishing the foundation allowed Jon to redirect the skills he had learned as a successful business and marketing executive toward a project deeply connected to his life and family. When he explains the foundation’s operations and the hard work involved, his voice rushes with energy.

“It is exceptionally rewarding,” says Jon, who left the private sector when his wife’s condition became critical. “And it has given my two children an incredible amount of solace, a little bit of meaning behind what happened to Mommy.”

Find out more: www.jajf.org



Jeremy Barnicle, BA'94

Jeremy Barnicle wants your attention.

He directs communications for Mercy Corps, an aid and development organization that operates in more than 35 war-torn and impoverished countries. This work demands resources. Mercy Corps’ budget tops \$225 million a year, and it employs more than 3,700 people worldwide. Through his outreach, Barnicle helps bring in the money that makes its work possible.

“I spend most of my time thinking about how to connect with and mobilize Americans,” Barnicle says. “What are Americans doing with their time? What moves them? How can we mobilize this into social change?”

Barnicle grew up in a family that emphasizes public service. His father worked for the government, and Barnicle spent his teen years steeped in the political culture of Washington, D.C. At Vanderbilt he explored the three interests that inspire his professional life: politics, communications and foreign affairs. He wrote for *The Vanderbilt Hustler*, majored in public policy and traveled abroad. As a volunteer with Alternative Spring Break in Guatemala, he saw severe poverty up close for the first time.

“There is a universal humanity: People want a livelihood, safety for their kids, prospects for their kids. In war zones people still laugh and get married and do all sorts of things.”