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Shoulder to Shoulder's profile surges

BY SAUNDRA AMRHEIN
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His blue eyes twinkle and his smile easily turns mischievous. But the mission of Dr. Jeffery Heck is serious business.

The University of Cincinnati director of the Family Medicine Residency & International Health Program has turned a nonprofit agency with a small Honduran clinic into a major relief operation.

Six years ago, with the help of local leaders, the Wyoming doctor set up a clinic in the southwestern town of Santa Lucia. The clinic, run by the community, is financed and staffed through Dr. Heck's nonprofit agency, Shoulder to Shoulder Inc.

Every six months since 1993, he has sent doctors, residents and students to work at the clinic through UC's international health program.

"It's good for them to see how 90 percent of the world lives," Dr. Heck said. "It enriches them as people."

When Hurricane Mitch struck in late October, Dr. Heck used the connections of his program and Shoulder to Shoulder to launch a massive relief effort in Honduras.

Before the mission this month, Shoulder to Shoulder shipped seven semi-trailer-sized containers of food, medical supplies and building materials paid for with donations from Greater Cincinnati.

It did so with the help of Chiquita Brands International and Loveland-based Matthew 25: Ministries, with whom it began a partnership after Mitch.

The food will feed 2,027 families for two weeks, said Daniel Castro, director of Medical Ministries International in Honduras.

Four more containers are to be shipped from Cincinnati. But Mr. Castro worries that help will dry up before Hondurans can fully recover.

The country also needs seeds and tools to replant, he told Wayne Waite, president of Shoulder to Shoulder, during the visit.

A few days later, Mr. Waite scored a victory for the relief mission by clinching an agreement with Food for the Poor, a nonprofit agency based in Florida.

The 17-year-old group, on track to raise \$180 million in donations for countries in Central America and the Caribbean this year, agreed to supply Shoulder to Shoulder with three containers of food and supplies a month.

It's those alliances with Hondurans fostered by Dr. Heck and Shoulder to Shoulder that inspires participants in the international health program. For instance, at Shoulder to Shoulder's clinic in Santa Lucia, a local health committee maintains the clinic and sets fees for patients on a sliding scale.

Michelle Drury, 25, says Dr. Heck inspired her to enter the international health program. The UC medical student and Sandusky, Ohio, native begins her residency this summer.

"He's one of the reasons why I came into the program," she said.

During the mission in Honduras, Dr. Heck lobbied officials to dedicate more resources for young doctors to work in rural health care centers.

Without them, most farmers have little or no access to medical treatment.

"Our goal is to have four or five sites in a couple of years that we can support," Dr. Heck said. "We have a model that worked really well in Santa Lucia, and I think it's a model that could work anywhere in the country."