

# From Temple to Tanzania

Albert Alley and the World Blindness Outreach

By MICHAEL IZZO, MD '18

I was primed for the phone interview, eager to convince Dr. Alley to let me go with him on the eye-surgery mission to Tanzania.

But the first thing he said was: "Michael, how can I make this trip valuable for you?"

He's President of World Blindness Outreach — this incredible organization — and I was a medical student he'd never met. Yet he's concerned about my needs.

It was almost anticlimactic that he accepted me for the mission sight unseen. Was it because he knew that my dad is an ophthalmologist and my mom is a nurse — and they wanted to go on the mission, too?

Later Dr. Alley said those factors were icing on the cake — but he took me because I was a Temple med student. "I knew you'd be an excellent addition," he said.

## THE ALLEY MAGIC

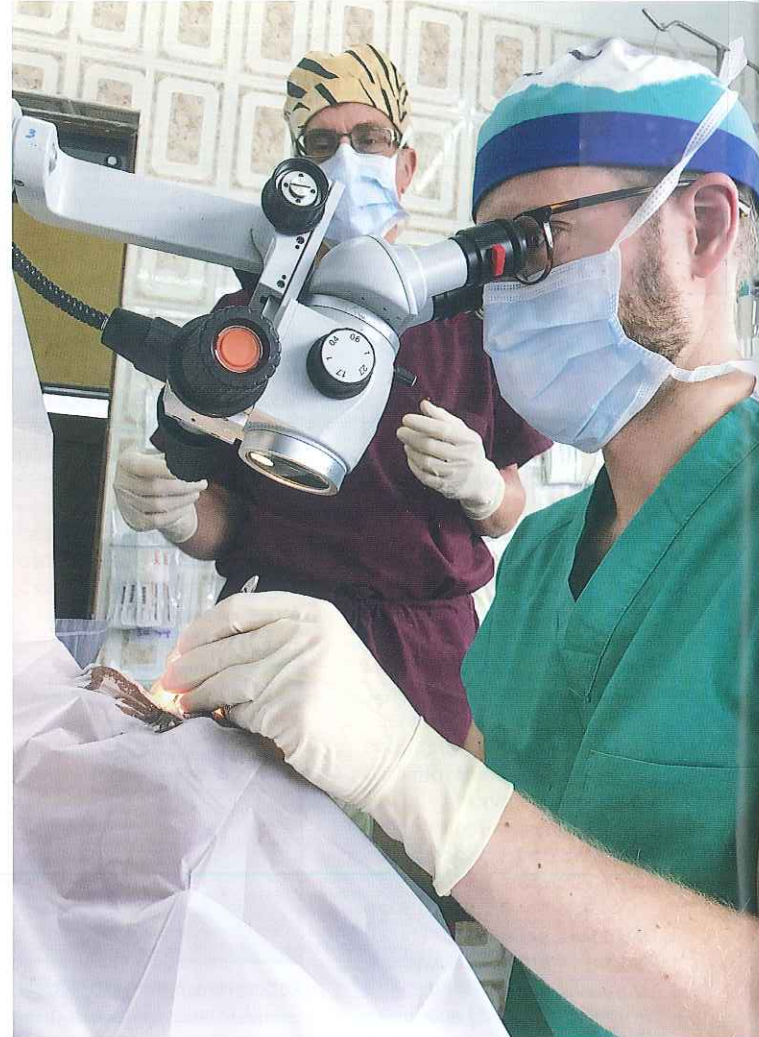
Albert Alley, MD, a 1964 graduate of Temple's medical school, President and Co-Founder of World Blindness Outreach (WBO), is one of the most caring and attentive people you could ever hope to meet. He practiced ophthalmology in Lebanon, PA, for four decades. And in 1990 (two years before I was born) he and his WBO volunteers began traveling the world to perform sight-restoring surgeries for people who would otherwise remain functionally blind.

They travel to Ecuador and the Dominican Republic annually to do this amazing work — and have completed about 90 other missions in 25 countries, including Cambodia, El Salvador, Ghana, India, and Vietnam. All told, the WBO has done more than 10,000 cataract, corneal transplant, glaucoma, and strabismus surgeries — an awe-inspiring amount of service. Yet Dr. Alley laments that 42 million people in the world remain functionally blind.

"Avoidable blindness is a tragedy," he says.

Honestly, I understand why this unmet need keeps the WBO mission urgent and keen. And three decades of experience has made WBO a well-oiled machine. It fascinated me to learn how much prep work Dr. Alley puts into each mission.

Months ahead of each trip, he works with physicians at the destination to identify patients and to secure operating room space and post-op accommodations. If needed, they'll even arrange transportation for patients from remote villages. Patients



will be picked up before surgery, then once cleared for release, be taken safely home again.

Early on, WBO learned that one missing tool can jeopardize an entire mission. Therefore, they either pre-ship, or travel with, all supplies and instruments they'll need: microscopes, slit lamps, surgical instruments, autoclave, lens implants, everything down to sutures and eye drops. At the end of each mission, they leave behind whatever they can for the local physicians.

Of course, Dr. Alley recruits volunteers from the U.S. to accompany him on each mission. Many people with Temple connections have participated over the years, including Dr. Alley's daughter, Cynthia Alley, MD, a 2000 graduate of Temple's medical school and former director of Temple's ophthalmology residency program. Naturally, professionals at the destination volunteer on the patient care team, too. WBO has trained hundreds of people at the mission sites over the years. "And we've learned quite a lot from them too," Dr. Alley says.

The mission I went on in July 2017 was WBO's first to Dar es Salaam, the largest city in Tanzania. Dr. Alley had networked with local ophthalmologists to screen patients



Far left: Cataract surgery in progress. Above: Dr. Albert Alley with some of his fans. Lower left: Minutes after surgery. Lower right: A large cataract.

and reserve an operating room at the Killman Road Police Hospital, a small facility on the southern outskirts of the city. Nine of us went on this mission, including Dr. Alley, me, my parents, an ophthalmology resident, a surgical tech, an instrument tech, Dr. Alley's wife, and his nephew, a primary care physician. Our team also included four Tanzanian ophthalmologists and nurses who we relied on to communicate with patients who spoke Swahili.

Most of our patients came in on buses from outlying villages. It awed me to see them patiently awaiting their turns. Most were in their 50s and 60s, with cataracts as dense as marble — too large, in fact, for the procedure normally done in the United States called phacoemulsification. So we did open surgery, a more "old-fashioned" approach.

What an amazing experience it was. I got to serve as Dr. Alley's first assistant on many of the cases. I was afraid I'd fumble, hand him the wrong instrument, or break the sterile

field. But Dr. Alley remained cognizant of my ability level. He was as patient and understanding as can be — doing superlative surgery — and teaching me each step of the way.

To do the most good it can on each mission, WBO focuses on patients with correctable blindness only. And typically will only operate on just one eye of each patient. That way, more patients can benefit. The team works 10 hours per day, doing about 85 surgeries in five days.

The post-op transformations were incredible to witness. Just the day before the patients were barely able to see. But when we removed their bandages, we watched them experience sight — often for the first time in years. "Asante, asante," they said, crying tears of joy. Talk about emotional! It was even more special to share all this with my parents. Not too many families get to share a medical mission abroad — let alone with an amazing family like the Alleys. In fact, in the Dominican Republic, WBO operates in the Linda Alley Clinic — named by the Dominicans in honor of Dr. Alley's other daughter, Linda, who's had an incredible passion for the country ever since her time in the Peace Corps in the 1990s. They love Dr. Alley so much in Ecuador they named a *street* after him in Nagua: Albert Alley Way.

Dr. Alley is beloved at home in Pennsylvania, too. He gives to the residents of central Pennsylvania through another non-profit he started: Mission Cataract Lebanon Valley. He's also been an active member of Rotary since 1976. He was president of the Lebanon Rotary Club and governor of District 7390.

"The people we help might be financially poor, but they are emotionally rich," Dr. Alley says.

That is part of the Alley magic. He cares about every person he meets. You feel like a friend instantly. And after a week, you feel like family.

## SMALL-WORLD STORY

When I first heard about Dr. Alley, I had no idea we had Temple in common. Later we discovered other connections, too. We found out, for example, that we're both Eagle Scouts.

Dr. Albert Alley embodies every trait to which an Eagle Scout and Temple Owl could possibly aspire. Professionalism and high standards, courtesy and compassion. And an amazing spirit of generosity. No wonder he received the medical school's Alumni Achievement Award in 1999.

Dr. Alley has been incredibly generous to Temple. In fact, he and Cynthia created the Albert Alley and Cynthia Alley Endowed Scholarship fund for medical students. All the good he's done in this world truly amazes me.

I am so fortunate to have Dr. Alley and my dad in my life. And, yes, I intend to follow in their footsteps and pursue ophthalmology.

I know that service work will be part of my future, continuing the rich tradition of cataract surgery mission work that Dr. Alley has shown me.

"Give, and you'll be amazed at the benefits you receive," Dr. Alley says.

Absolutely.

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