



MATHEW'S MISSION

Doctor on the go

Text by Amelia Glynn : Photo by Michael Paras

He was nearly 20 years older than his fellow students when he started medical school at age 59. Now **Dr. Mathew Skaria** provides help and healing to people in need around the world.

Dr. Mathew Skaria isn't tired. But he should be. Mathew is a physician and a workaholic—a nomad who travels the world to treat the sick and underserved. It's early June, and he is on his way to an Indian reservation near Louisville, Kentucky. He had hoped to be back in Kenya by now, but the

country's recent political conflicts have put his project behind schedule. Mathew's story isn't simply that of a run-of-the-mill, globe-trotting do-gooder. His is one about a man who went to medical school at nearly 60 years of age and who, since graduating in 2003, hasn't charged a patient a single penny.

What prompts someone in his late 50s to sign up for one of the most grueling training programs known? What inspires him to take on four long years of study and 24-hour hospital shifts at an age when most people are planning their tee times? As Mathew would say, "You could sit here in the living room and listen from morning

to night. It's a very long story."

He was born in Pathanamthitta, India, in the central part of Kerala state near the Arabian Sea. "Kerala means 'land or garden of coconut plants,'" explains Mathew, who is used to sharing ideas and information. Before becoming a doctor, he taught life sciences in India, the West Indies, and the United States—experience that helped take the sting out of medical school exams. "The foundation of most of my classes was the same as what I'd been teaching for 38 years," he says. He also has a Ph.D. in public health.

Mathew's life changed the day his 9-year-old daughter, Reny, was diagnosed with a rare form of bone cancer. While living in Jamaica, he and his family were on a visit to Kerala when the oncologist broke the news: Reny would need to have her entire leg removed from the hip down—an operation that would confine her to crutches and wheelchairs for the rest of her life. Without the surgery, the doctor gave her six months to live.

"I remember thinking, Who is this person talking to me?" Mathew says, recalling the conversation. "I don't believe man can put a limit on life."

That's when a thought shot "like a lightning bolt" through his mind: Your daughter will walk without crutches. "Something was telling me not to yield to the surgery," he says, his voice cracking slightly. "I believe that God was telling me to wait."

A second opinion from a physician friend in Kingston, Jamaica, presented the same prognosis: Remove the entire leg or the cancer will spread. Mathew conceded. "Both doctors said exactly the same thing, so I thought, OK, we have to do this."

Several days before the surgery, he received a call from the surgeon's office saying they needed to reschedule. Mathew took it as a sign. He canceled the surgery and, at the suggestion of a colleague, took Reny to California for treatment at Loma Linda University Medical Center. When they arrived, the hospital refused to admit Reny

because she was not an American citizen and did not have U.S. health insurance. But Mathew remained undeterred.

A Loma Linda employee and family friend referred them to a physician who worked in a hospital near Pasadena, California. After hearing their story, the doctor generously offered to treat Reny without charge. His assessment of her illness was the same, but he agreed, at Mathew's urging, to postpone the surgery and begin aggressive chemotherapy. Mathew was determined that his daughter would walk without crutches.

After three years of close observation, the doctor again recommended amputation—but this time below the knee. "You were right," he told me," recalls Mathew. "Your daughter will

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walk without crutches." Reny was now 13 and her leg had become so weak that she was unable to support her own weight without assistance. After the surgery, she was fitted with a prosthetic limb and she relearned how to walk.

Mathew vividly remembers the day Reny was discharged from the hospital. "When we got to the house she told me, 'Dad, you stay in the car.' She threw her crutches on the lawn and walked several times around the outside of the house."

By the time Reny was in college, Mathew had decided he would go to medical school. So at age 59 he began his first year at St. Luke School of Medicine in Liberia, one of the only schools that would accept him in spite of his age. He was nearly two decades older than the next oldest student, and because of his experience as a retired professor, both his instructors and

classmates considered him something special. "On my first day of class, they were so happy to see me," he says.

He did his clinical rotations on an Indian reservation in South Dakota and went to Kenya for his internship. He specializes in minor surgeries and diagnostic endoscopy, and he has a keen interest in diabetes management. But when he's working in developing countries, he's often just another pair of hands doing whatever needs to be done, which has included treating bow-and-arrow wounds in East Timor.

Mathew, who became a U.S. citizen in 2000 (he considers California his home base), believes people in this country don't realize how blessed they are. He prefers to work "where the poor people live" and is quick to point out that he didn't become a doctor for the money. "My experience with Reny made me see life in a different way," he says. "Everyone I have treated so far, I have done so without charge. I do this because my daughter got something more than I ever expected for free."

He asks only that the various health care organizations that employ him cover his airfare and room and board. Because he's on the move, he can forgo monthly expenses like rent and car payments, and he relies on his Social Security checks and retirement savings to support his otherwise spartan lifestyle. His three daughters seem in awe of him. They don't understand how his life works. It simply does.

With a whole career ahead of him, Mathew is deciding what to do next. He may return to Kenya to work as a hospital administrator, or perhaps he'll go to Ghana to teach life sciences. He is also considering starting a preventive-health-care clinic in India.

"I am in good health. I am not tired," says the soon-to-be 66-year-old. "God has given me a good mission. It keeps me going."

San Francisco-based writer Amelia Glynn (ameliaaglynn.com) has always had dreams of becoming a doctor.