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Stephanie Van Dyke displays photos of the health clinic she is building in Uganda with money inherited from her grandmother. (Will Waldrom / Times Union)

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Albany woman uses inheritance to build clinic in impoverished Uganda

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## Med student's gift brings hope

Albany woman uses inheritance to build clinic in impoverished Uganda

By **CATHLEEN F. CROWLEY**, Staff writer  
Click byline for more stories by writer.  
First published: Saturday, December 23, 2006

ALBANY -- Stephanie Van Dyke has sat at the bedside of dying people as a hospice volunteer. She baby-sat children while their drug-addicted mothers were in therapy. She cared for orphans in a rural village in South Africa and fed diseased monkeys quarantined in Thailand.

But it wasn't until Van Dyke traveled to Uganda that she found the despair that would redefine her life. An African country about the size of Oregon, Uganda borders Sudan, Kenya, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Van Dyke taught English in a rural village where there was no running water, electricity or medical care. People with broken legs crawled on the ground with limbs that never healed properly.

Van Dyke wracked her brain for a way to help. "I couldn't think of anything other than becoming a doctor that was more effective," she said.

So Van Dyke, who had avoided science classes during her education, applied to medical school and was accepted. Today, she is a second-year student at Albany Medical School.

Van Dyke, 29, a native of Portland, Ore., speaks rapidly, with her eyes stretched wide open and her hands fluttering. It's 10 a.m. and she's already had three cups of coffee.

She considered buying a house in Albany. Her grandmother, who owned a German bakery, died and left Van Dyke \$35,000. She searched Albany neighborhoods for a nice place. "But it just didn't feel right," she said. "Why am I buying a house here when I want to be in Africa?"

She used the money to build a health clinic there.

Last summer, she returned to Uganda with a small group of friends and family. With the help of John Kalule, a Ugandan volunteer that Van Dyke met on her first visit, and dozens of villagers, they constructed the clinic and two buildings to house the medical staff. It took two months.

The Engeye Clinic is located in Ddegeya Village, about 100 miles south of

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Kampala, the capital. Villagers, who were paid about \$3 a day for their work, strapped water buckets to their bicycles and walked them up a hill to reach the clinic. It took three days to collect enough water to mix the concrete. A Ugandan latrine specialist dug a 50-foot trench, without supports, to serve as the clinic's toilet.

When the project ran out of money, Van Dyke's parents contributed \$10,000.

The buildings are empty now, but Van Dyke will spend spring break there with two doctors, a nurse and several fellow students from Albany Med. One of the doctors is Dr. Robert Paeglow, an Albany physician and an administrator at Albany Med. Paeglow devotes most of his vacations to practicing medicine in Third World countries.

"Stephanie is an incredible person," Paeglow said. "She's a ball of fire and energy and really dedicated to helping people. I'm almost tired out when I'm in her presence because of her energy."

Van Dyke's decision to spend her inheritance on the health clinic impressed Paeglow.

"In a place like Africa, a relatively small investment can reap huge dividends and because she invested what others might consider a small amount of money, hundreds of people will be helped," he said.

Van Dyke struggles to explain why Uganda so completely enticed her.

"This was the first time where I saw such suffering where people weren't already doing something," she said.

In Ddegeya Village, she said, she has an opportunity to make a difference where no one else dared to try.

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