



## THE GIFTS OF GIVING: DR. LOUIS CODA & FAMILY

By Catherine McCorkle

It's not unusual for a physician to travel overseas and engage in medical mission work. It's not so unusual for a doctor to sustain that work, to return and build relationships with those abroad. Louis Coda, MD, HU '85, has had his family with him during a lifetime of medical mission work. What may be unusual was the opportunity he had last year to work side by side in Uganda with his daughter, Clare Coda, MD '15, now a resident at the University of Maryland. Service, along with medicine, has become a family business.

Both of Louis Coda's parents (Evis J. Coda, MD '47, and Rosemary K. Coda, RN '47) graduated from Hahnemann, so while growing up in Los Angeles, he always had medicine as a professional example. Yet, he says, "I was actually thinking about going into religious life, though something never quite sat right with that."

He attended UCLA, majoring in biology, but had no set plan for life afterwards. A family friend, a Jesuit priest, suggested he consider the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, a two-year service immersion program. "I looked into it," Coda says, "and doors just kept opening, so I went through."

He ended up working at a boys' home in Bethel, Alaska. "That's where I met my wife [Martha, a social worker], and that changed my plan." His next thought was, "Well, now I've got to get a job."



*Clare Coda examines a young patient in Uganda as her father looks on.*

### LEARNING WHAT'S OF VALUE

Although Coda hadn't considered the medical profession as a younger man, his biology background put him in good standing. He attended Hahnemann, his parents' alma mater. After a residency in internal medicine and pediatrics at Wright State University, Coda learned about the Mission Doctors Association, a Catholic organization based in Los Angeles that connects doctors and their families with overseas hospitals.

Two years later, he and his family were at St. Mary's Hospital in Papua New Guinea. His daughters, Clare and Teresa, were 18 months and 6 months old, respectively. A son, John, would be born there.

Coda relates an experience that stands out from that time. A mother brought her newborn to the hospital; the baby was at 30 percent of his birth weight. Coda and other hospital staff tried to help, but they were met with one obstacle after another. At one point, they pooled their funds to pay the anesthesiologist so a surgery could be performed. During this whole ordeal, the baby nearly died several times. Finally, after the surgery, with the mother holding the baby, the child passed. Coda felt like a failure.

A few days later, he saw the mother in the fields near the hospital, working to pay off her bill. Eventually, the mother returned to the hospital to speak with him: “‘You treated me like a daughter,’ she said. ‘I’m forever thankful for your having done that.’” Coda continues, “So much of overseas work is all these little things that come together that sort of teach you failure and success. What’s of value and what’s not of value.”

There are many stories like this, as well as many children who live and die, he says. This story, however, “was so touching because it taught me a lot. That’s overseas work. It’s changing you at a soul level. It’s why I can’t stay away.”

## **A LIFE OF IMMEDIACY**

After Papua New Guinea, the Coda family moved to Pennsylvania, where another son, Anthony, was born. In early 2004, they relocated to Cameroon, in West Africa, for six months. Coda made a brief solo foray to Liberia, but the family would join him again in Uganda in 2009 — except for daughters Clare and Teresa, who were both in college. The family returned to Uganda in 2013, but Clare was now a Drexel medical student.

Finally, in April 2015, Clare joined her father and mother in Uganda through a medical school elective. During the six weeks of her visit, she and her father covered the pediatric ward at Saint Francis Hospital, which had from 30 to 60 children.

Father and daughter both recall a shared experience during their time in Uganda. They were seeing a line of children one at a time as their mothers waited with them in a separate area. A mother of twins ran to the front of the line, holding her child, crying, “My baby.” The child had died. “You knew the baby had been alive 10 minutes earlier,” Clare observes.

“You don’t even have time to mourn,” her father says. Since they had a line of children to examine, he reminded his daughter, “You have to keep going.”

Twenty minutes later, the mother was back in the doctors’ room with her other twin. “Even the mother doesn’t get to mourn the child who died. You can see her pain,” says Lou Coda. She was the only family member there with her children, and she needed to have the next child seen. “Life and death were much more present,” Clare says. “A baby died, but then she had another one — she had to keep doing her job.”

Now in her first year of residency, Coda says she would like to return overseas to continue her medical mission work, although that may have to wait until after her training. She is following her father’s footsteps in another way, as well — specializing in internal medicine and pediatrics.

Coda senior says he and his wife plan to return to Uganda in 2017. He says that volunteering is simply something they have always done. “All those things that you’re given during those times are really priceless. It’s a way to be true to yourself. I’m grateful I’ve had the chance to do all these things,” he says. In 2016, the Mission Doctors Association honored Louis and Martha Coda with the Monsignor Brouwers Award for Faith and Service.



*Lou Coda, with baby and mother in an ICU, has spent his life in mission work. "You get down to that layer where life is happening," he says.*

Clare Coda says her younger siblings, Teresa, John, and Anthony, have been influenced by their parents' example as well. "Ever since [the Jesuit Volunteer Corps], our parents have lived this very interesting lifestyle that focuses on serving other people and thinking outside of yourself," she reflects. "That's what we grew up with. I think you can tell that in all of us and as we've chosen our careers. I feel very lucky to have them as my parents."

After graduation from Juniata College, Clare also volunteered with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps; she was placed in Philadelphia. Along with its focus on service, the program emphasizes living in community and with simplicity. There is the idea that once a person goes through this, they cannot go back to their old way of thinking — they are, in a way, "ruined." Coda observes, "I guess that's what my parents have led in their lifestyle — kind of the JVC aspect of 'ruined for life.' They've been ruined and they ruined it for the rest of us."



*Three generations (l-r): Louis Coda, MD, HU '85; Evis J. Coda, MD, HU '47; and Clare Coda, MD '15. Clare's grandmother Rosemary K. Coda, RN '47, also graduated from Hahnemann.*