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To learn more about guinea worm disease and other initiatives at The Carter Center, go to cartercenter.org

A Village Woman's Legacy

An encounter with the victim of an old scourge gave a former President a new worldview—and a mission

SOMETIMES IT'S THE QUIETEST VOICE THAT speaks the loudest. The quiet voice I heard in 1988 was that of a young woman from Ghana. The morning my wife Rosalynn and I visited the woman's village of Denchira, near the Ghanaian capital of Accra, she sat timidly on a bench amid her neighbors, who had assembled to greet us. She appeared to be in excruciating pain, and it looked as if she were cradling a baby in her right arm. As I approached, I was shocked to see that she was not holding a baby but her grossly swollen right breast. A guinea worm was emerging from the nipple, causing her a fiery agony as it migrated through her body. Here was the most graphic and disturbing example I had ever seen of the centuries-old guinea worm disease and all its devastating consequences. Although the scourge was preventable, it was ravaging the most neglected villages of Africa and Asia.

I was horrified to find out later that the worm was one of 11 that had thrived in the young woman's body that season. And in that primitive settlement, she was among 200 or so people, out of a population of 500, infected. Villagers of all ages were too weak to walk or permanently scarred and crippled. As a result, a community would go hungry because its farmers were too sick to work the fields.

Encountering those victims firsthand, particularly the teenagers and small children, propelled me and Rosalynn to step up The Carter Center's efforts to eradicate guinea worm disease. The image of the young woman's suffering not only personalized the illness but also forced me to view life for the first time through the eyes of

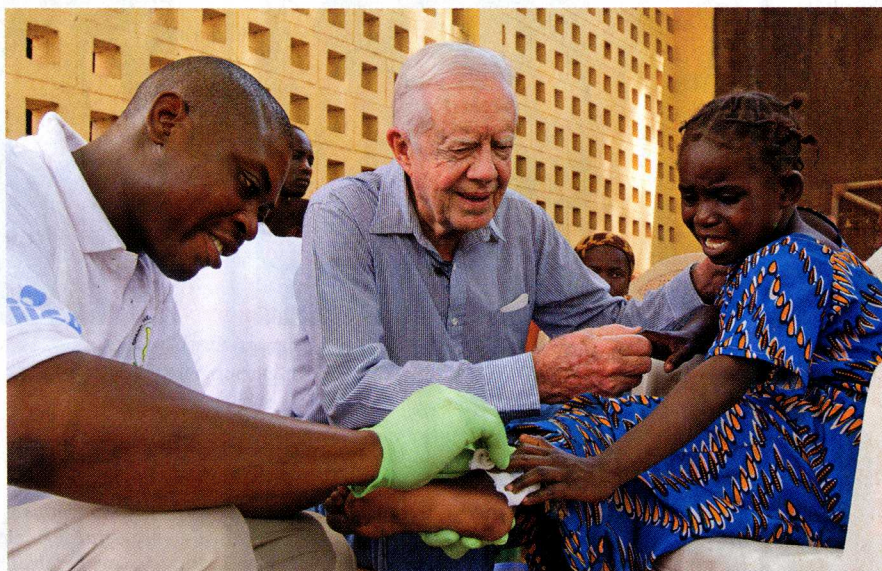
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the poor, the powerless and the voiceless and to come to terms with how the quality of their existence affects the world at large. I realized too that I could have done more when I was President to help people in developing countries.

Until that point, I had dealt with global matters in a more macro way. As President, I was primarily interested in peace in the Middle East, normalizing relations

tries, compared with 3.5 million in 1986.

Whenever I spend time in villages like Denchira, I draw from my childhood memories in rural Georgia. I know that when farmers are ill, their families and communities suffer as well. I'm also aware that proper health care is a basic human right, thanks to the superb treatment I received at a clinic in my hometown of Plains and the abiding example of my mother Lillian. A registered



Beating it On a trip to Ghana in 2007, more than 20 years after he began efforts to eradicate guinea worm disease, Carter visited a hospital where a girl was being treated for the painful condition

with China and avoiding war with the Soviet Union. I had often met with a nation's leader without comprehending the daily struggles of its average citizen. Fortunately, this time around, I had both the opportunity and the sensibility to do things differently. Working on behalf of The Carter Center, we persuaded other organizations—including the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Peace Corps—to join in the fight against the illness. When we started fighting the disease, guinea worm was in 20 African and Asian countries. Today, I'm happy to say, we are tackling the last cases. Fewer than 10,000 people are still afflicted in five African coun-

ntries, she taught me that lesson every time she ministered, free of charge when necessary, to any person, black or white, in the segregated South of my youth.

I never did see that young woman again or find out what happened to her. But the following year when we returned to her village, guinea worm had been nearly eliminated there, through the efforts of The Carter Center, other organizations and the villagers themselves. Having seen her that day in 1988, I came to examine life differently—in a micro way. I now believe that the vitality of one person's life has an impact on the health and harmony of the surrounding world. —AS TOLD TO MICHELLE LODGE ■

LOUISE GUBB—THE CARTER CENTER