

WESTHAMPTON Living

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**Serving Others
through World
Pediatric Project**

**Donna and Rob Brown
Are Doctors at Home
and Abroad**

Cover Photo by Kami Thacker Photography



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Finding Family in the Caribbean

World Pediatric Project Gives the Browns a Second Home

By Maggi Tinsley | Photos by Kami Thacker Photography

Thanks to their decades of volunteer service in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Donna and Rob Brown truly feel like they have family members there in this small Caribbean country. Those coworkers-turned-friends have visited their Windsor Farms home, sometimes bringing their own children just like the Browns took their daughters on service trips in years past. And what they learned from their experiences is that “everybody all over the world is the same—parents will do almost anything to help their kids,” Donna says.

“When I read in my daughter Karen’s personal statement for application to med school that she wanted to be a doctor because of working with us in St. Vincent (SVG) with World Pediatric Project (WPP),” Donna adds, “I knew we had made a great decision to give our girls that experience.” How did the Browns end up in St. Vincent, which they now consider their second home? They credit their local friends and fellow physicians, Dr. Nadia Blanchet and her husband Dr. Kent Rollins, who introduced them to the volunteer opportunities there.

The Brown family had moved to Richmond from Dallas in 1990 following the completion of the couple’s medical training at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School/Parkland Hospital. Donna is an ophthalmologist at the Virginia Eye Institute who practices the subspecialties cornea and external diseases of the eye and pediatric ophthalmology and adult strabismus. Rob practices urology at Virginia Urology. They arrived in Westhampton with two children born in Dallas who were just one month and 14 months old.

Rob Brown and Kent Rollins work together at Virginia Urology, so that’s how the two couples met and how their shared passion grew. Blanchet and Rollins were looking for somewhere to volunteer as they completed their medical training here at VCU. “Coincidentally, on their honeymoon in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, they met a U.S.-trained doctor, Dr. Frederick Ballantyne, who was a cardiologist and the chief medical officer at the hospital and through his dedication had changed the medical community there,” Donna recalls. “After their chance meeting on the beach, the couple told

him that they wanted to volunteer their medical and surgical skills.”

Initially, Virginia Urology sent two doctors to St. Vincent quarterly to help the many men who suffered from urinary retention. At the same time, Dr. Blanchet, a plastic surgeon, performed cleft lip and palate repairs, among other facial and reconstructive surgeries. “When we started going to SVG, there were children for whom I could do surgical care there in the Caribbean because there was an infrastructure of primary and secondary medical care and there are procedures that have low risk of post-op complications,” Donna explains.



Early on, she became aware of a baby who had a malignant tumor of the retina of the eye who had been born in St. Vincent and was diagnosed with the condition by a doctor there. This condition could not be treated in St. Vincent. “I investigated the opportunity to bring the baby to Richmond for care and found out about International Hospital for Children, now World Pediatric Project,” Donna recalls. “This organization helped me to bring this child here within only a few days and we were able to operate on the baby at St. Mary’s Hospital. Now 20 years later he remains alive and well due to the generosity of St. Mary’s Hospital, WPP and the other physicians who helped with his care.”

After such a successful experience of bringing that first child here, Donna knew that she wanted to keep working with WPP, and all four physicians were seeking opportunities to give their expertise as volunteers in a developing country where they were needed. Because of immigration

rules, the sponsorship of a non-governmental organization was required to sponsor patients who are brought to the U.S. for surgeries that they cannot receive in their home countries. For these Richmonders, WPP filled the bill. “The organization was already established in St. Vincent, a country with a small population and a ministry of health that is able and willing to help coordinate care along with a stable and supportive government, and the doctors there want to work with us,” she says. To this day, she is in frequent contact consulting with Dr. Grant, her ophthalmology colleague there.

“WPP completed the circle of medical and surgical care for the children of SVG and changed the life of my family, because it created the opportunity for our girls to go with us,” Donna recalls. Daughters Lauren and Karen joined their parents as youngsters, and continued to do so until each went to college. That the pair have become medical professionals themselves is due in large part to their early experiences with WPP. Lauren is a physician assistant who works with an orthopedic surgeon in Atlanta. And Karen has completed an ophthalmology residency and is in a fellowship training to be an oculoplastic surgeon. “They both plan to continue our family’s work in St. Vincent and wherever the work of WPP may lead,” Donna proudly notes. “They are humanitarians at heart and medical providers by trade.”

World Pediatric Project’s history goes back almost as far as when the Browns began volunteering. A Rotarian dentist named



Dr. Julian Metts in Richmond started the International Hospital for Children after his own volunteer trip to Guyana. Moved by both the experience and the need, he asked like minded friends for their support to start a virtual hospital. Once successfully under way, IHC soon merged with St. Louis’ Healing The Children Missouri, and the two organizations rebranded as WPP.

“Having two children’s hospitals in St. Louis allowed us to expand our reach,” Donna notes, adding that WPP is opening an office in Raleigh next. She is currently serving again on the executive board of WPP, having been board chairman in the past. “Our board has expanded both within the U.S. and internationally, and we have now rebounded after the pandemic,” she adds, noting that the organization did not close during Covid but stayed afloat and well managed thanks to wonderful staff and supportive donors!

Today, after their decades of service, the Browns see more care happening in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. “More local and regional physicians now meet our





credentialing guidelines,” Donna explains, “so we do not have to bring all of the pediatric patients to the U.S.”

And WPP continues to expand its program into additional developing countries, often adding places where Richmond doctors are already established as volunteers. “Our goal is to have the infrastructure in each geography to facilitate the work of the doctors and surgeons regionally and those U.S. medical providers who WPP sends to work in our partner countries,” she explains. “At least in the Eastern Caribbean we have a ‘hub’ concept that allows us to reach children in any of the OECS (Organization of Eastern Caribbean States).”

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Donna says that one of her goals is to improve care for adults too. By adding sustainability for improved surgical care for children there can also be increased expertise for adult patients as well. “There are a number of surgical care options that are ‘easy’ fixes,” she explains. “Once we expand the local reach for ophthalmology, we then can expand that to other subspecialties in each geography.” She’s confident that this evolution can happen because WPP has a solid infrastructure in place.

Looking back on her career in Richmond, Donna expresses gratitude that this is where she and Rob landed. “Richmond is a great place to live, to practice medicine and to rear children,” she affirms. “And I think the two U.S. cities where WPP has offices are especially philanthropic, which is something else I love about Richmond.” As she prepares to retire from her practice at Virginia Eye Institute, Donna looks forward to continuing her work with WPP, focusing on strategic planning and spending much of the winter in St. Vincent, her second home.

Both Browns consider themselves lucky that they became connected to the work and the people of St. Vincent through WPP. “I am proud to be a sort of U.S. ambassador, showing people in that small country that there are American citizens who care about what happens in their communities,” she concludes.

