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Egleston Nurses Help Deliver International Cardiac Care

Every year, Egleston nurses **Brenda Jarvis** and **Lisa Poppell** pack up the massive collection of hats and baby blankets their CICU colleagues have crocheted over the previous months. The hats are a goodwill gesture, a small but telling detail in a program aimed at modernizing Russia's pediatric cardiology care. In remote regions of the massive country, Brenda and Lisa, loaded with their knobby, flower-bedecked gifts, work with a team of doctors and other medical professionals to train their Russian counterparts, care for patients and help establish fully self-sustaining pediatric cardiac units.

When Brenda first agreed to take part in an education-focused service trip in 2006, she thought she was bound for Guatemala. Then the trip's organizer, **Janet Simsic, M.D.**, asked her, "How do you feel about Russia?" Since 1989, [Heart to Heart International Children's Medical Alliance](#) has arranged annual trips to different areas of the country, focusing on one or two pediatric cardiac programs at a time until they are self-sustaining. The organization came out of a desperate letter from Russian parents to UC Davis surgeon Nilas Young, M.D., begging him to operate on their child's heart defect. While Dr. Young traveled to what was then the U.S.S.R. and performed the life-saving surgery, he knew the model of fly-in-fly-out emergency treatment was unsustainable and founded Heart to Heart to pursue the larger goal of cardiac medical training.



Brenda's first stint with Dr. Simsic and the rest of the Heart to Heart team was to Tomsk, a Siberian city near Russia's center. As Brenda describes it, "When the Soviet Union dissolved and when Russia came out as a democratic country, a lot of the infrastructure was left over from the 1950s." Heart to Heart's pediatric CICUs are a notable exception – entering one of the completed programs, or "Heartland sites," is like jumping ahead 60 years in a few steps. As she gestures around Egleston's humming CICU, Brenda says that "all of the equipment is just as good as what we have here. They're just much smaller."

By that 2006 trip, Heart to Heart had completed two Heartland sites—one in St. Petersburg and one in Samara, a large city on the Volga River. As a program progresses, the training gets more advanced; sometimes the group might even decide to focus on a particular type of defect, such as Tetralogy of Fallot (TOF), a "blue baby" syndrome that requires a complex treatment approach. But 2006 was the first year of the Tomsk program, and, according to Brenda, it could be "frustrating at the beginning because [the Russian physicians] want to run. You have to walk before you can run." Russian doctors and nurses aren't paid competitively, meaning that many in the field choose medicine out of sheer passion for the work. Brenda also said that while the nurses' educational training is minimal, they're "wholly committed" to learning on the job.



The Heart to Heart team's makeup changes every year, with new doctors, nurses, clinical staff and translators coming onboard or sitting out a year or two. Two-thirds of Brenda's first-year team members were Children's staffers, joined by medical professionals from the Mayo Clinic. Combining volunteers from different organizations helps diversify educational opportunities, showing that there's more than one way to perform a medical procedure. In the months between the trips, the Russian clinicians keep in touch with their American counterparts, emailing each other or even taking immersion trips to hospitals like Children's.

That camaraderie between cardiac specialists extends beyond the "Heartniks," or Heart to Heart volunteers, to Brenda and Lisa's own Egleston colleagues. For several years, **Phyllis Marchant**, **Corey Anderson** and **Quinn Trahan**, all CICU nurses, have crocheted dozens of hats and other cozy items for the Russian patients. The pile of presents, which grows at Phyllis' home until the next Heart to Heart trip, includes not only cute caps for babies, but skull-bedecked beanies cool enough for the older patients finally getting advanced treatment. According to Brenda, "It's a way to give a little gift to the families."

Brenda says those interactions with families and the Russian medical teams are "humbling" and often make her more mindful of her work at Children's—whether that's keeping tabs on resources or appreciating simple things like the ability to transfer a patient between beds throughout a hospitalization. And while Brenda says the work makes her "want to be a better steward" back at home, it also exemplifies the commitment of Children's staff to improving cardiac care, no matter where the patient is based.



Images, top to bottom:

Lisa Poppell leads a PALS (Pediatric Advanced Life Support) break-out session in Tomsk, Russia.

Corey Anderson and Phyllis Marchant show off their stockpile of hats outside the Egleston CICU.

Brenda Jarvis leads a PALS class in Tomsk.

Update: The photo of Corey and Phyllis outside the CICU has captured the attention of the [Children's Facebook](#) audience. Facebook fans recognized and thanked both nurses by name and shared their own experiences as CICU parents.



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