

# Student, instructor team up to make a difference abroad

## STAFF REPORTS

Christopher Lacy is a surgical technology major at Edgecombe Community College, but he's already putting his skills to use to make a difference in the Dominican Republic.

When he talks about his recent trip to the country that shares a Caribbean island with Haiti, he beams with pride.

Lacy traveled to the country in November and worked in

the operating room with a team of nurses and doctors who performed nine surgeries.

"I was able to first scrub. I also set up the sterile field and gloved the doctors," Lacy said. "It was extremely great to work in the operating room with a team I never worked with before. I feel very accomplished."

Lacy's first visit to the Dominican Republic was complete with memories of majestic

mountain views, riding to the hospital on the back of a pickup truck with the operating team, and gleaning valuable information from medical experts, including a doctor he roomed with during the trip.

The educational and cultural exposure for Lacy, a month before graduation, was possible primarily because of the efforts of ECC's program chair for surgical technology, Suzi Shippen-Wagner. A

10-year employee of the college, Shippen-Wagner has traveled to four developing nations on three continents with U.S.-based medical teams.

"The first time I went on a medical mission, I went to Romania and kind of got the mission bug," Shippen-Wagner recalled. "It was just so gratifying to be able to take care of folks and know they would not be able to get this kind of care anywhere

else at any other time."

Since that Romania trip, the Kansas native has been involved with medical mission trips for nearly 15 years, with stops in the Honduras, Guatemala and the village of San Juan de la Maguana. Typically, students accompany Shippen-Wagner on her trips, applying what they've learned in the classroom to the operating rooms for gynecological surgery.

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Christopher Lacy, an Edgecombe Community College student, sits with his instructor, Suzi Shippen-Wagner.

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Since 2019, six students have traveled with the program chair. Lacy was the first male student to make a trip.

"I think for my students, confidence is competence," Shippen-Wagner said. "If you can scrub a case in a Third World country where resources are so very limited, you can do anything in the U.S. where we have the best of the best and unlimited resources."

According to Shippen-Wagner, surgical technology students get rigorous training before accompanying her on medical mission trips. They must complete 500 hours in the operating room and 120 cases. It takes about eight months for students to fulfill those requirements.

"From August to December, we learn our instruments, how to gown and glove each other and how to prep our patient," Shippen-Wagner noted. Students go to the hospital in January where they work with real patients. There is

no simulation.

Shippen-Wagner's training is why Lacy says he could travel to the Dominican Republic and perform without hesitation with a team of doctors from Boston and Raleigh as well as nurses from California, Florida and Georgia.

Lacy was one of 10 to be accepted to the Mayo Clinic for an internship this past summer. His pinning was held Dec. 13. He said he plans to obtain an undergraduate degree in applied science and wants to perform minimally invasive procedures after graduation.

His instructor says the work is fulfilling.

"We take care of one patient at a time, but we don't know what that means to the greater circles," Shippen-Wagner said. "That's a mother, a wife, a daughter. Surgery affects that family, village, church, employers. We take care of one patient, but we also take care of an untold amount of people."