

Doctor off to Africa for 9 months

Longtime pediatrician prepares for Rwandan adventure, reflects on past globe-trotting.

By Benjamin Graham

The adventures are far from over for 69-year-old Dr. Jim Little Sr.

In fact, his next adventure is just about to begin.

After chasing total solar eclipses all over the world, the longtime Jackson pediatrician will check one more country off his life list Nov. 1 when he moves to Rwanda to train other doctors.

Little will be taking a break from his practice in the valley to work with Dartmouth College through a program called Human Resources for Health in the sub-Saharan African nation. He will be joined by four other pediatricians as well as physicians and other medical staff from 13 medical schools.

"The purpose of the project is for Rwanda to have a self-sufficient medical education system," Little said. "The goal is to be able to have Rwandans training Rwandans."

He has seen many nongovernmental organizations and religious groups attempt to start clinics in other countries only to have them fail once the groups leave, he said. Little believes this program will be sustainable.

"To me, the whole concept is exciting," he said.

During his stay, Little will teach pediatric residents and help train doctors to teach residents at a hospital in a southern Rwandan city.

But he also hopes to have a few side adventures, such as forays into the forest to spot mountain gorillas and maybe even skiing.

"They have mountains up to 15,000 feet with permanent snowfields," he said. "Who knows? This is an adventure."

The nine-month experience will mark one of the longest stints Little has spent away from the valley since he moved here in 1972.

After finishing medical school in Denver and his pediatric residency in Madison, Wis., Little moved to Jackson, a place he had visited during a previous winter.

"I thought this was the greatest mountain to ski on in the country," he said.

Since then, Little has run his own practice and served on the staff at St. John's Medical Center.

"It's been fascinating for me to watch kids grow up," in this community, he said. "I've had patients that I've seen as kids that I've seen become grandparents."

He said he is most proud of all the children he has helped to raise.

But his life in Jackson Hole hasn't been all about health care. He has also used it as a home base from which to mount a variety of international excursions, many of which have involved traveling to witness total solar eclipses.

His interest in eclipses began when he found out one would be visible from Helena, Mont., his hometown. Little drove from Jackson to his parents' house to watch the astronomical phenomenon from their roof.

"It was the most incredible natural spectacle I had ever seen," he said.

The entire sky went dark momentarily, long enough for stars to become visible in the middle of the day.

"You've got the moon sitting right in front of the sun," he said. "You see the rays coming out of the sun all the way around."

The experience triggered what some would say became an obsession.

Total solar eclipses occur every year



Already worldly from having chased total solar eclipses for many years, Dr. Jim Little Sr. is heading to Rwanda for nine months to train other doctors. He also hopes to see mountain gorillas and maybe even go skiing in Africa.

or so, but they are only visible from specific locations. The moon must be full, and the spectator must be in the right spot to see the sun fully blocked.

A few years after watching that first eclipse in Montana, Little happened to be traveling in Nepal when he discovered a full eclipse would be visible from a small town on the eastern coast of India. So he made a detour. Little watched the eclipse from the roof of a hotel with his then-wife.

"It was really eerie," he said. "Everybody else went inside."

Since then, Little has traveled to many countries to view the natural occurrence, including Bolivia, Nicaragua, France, Turkey and Guatemala.

"In those days, you didn't have the Internet to pull up where the eclipses were," he said.

He signed up for a NASA mailing list in an effort to stay in the loop.

"Everywhere you go, there are literally thousands of people that come to see the eclipses," he said.

When he wasn't chasing the sun and the moon all over the Earth, Little sat on the board of Lower Valley Energy and on the Wyoming Board of Medicine and served as Teton County's public health officer from 1977 up until this summer. Over the years, he worked with public health nurses to monitor outbreaks of meningitis, swine flu and other sicknesses in Jackson Hole. He resigned as public health officer this summer to move to Rwanda. But the move hasn't gone as smoothly as anticipated.

Little was initially scheduled to go to Rwanda with Harvard University.

But at the last minute, he found out the university required physicians in the program to have medical licenses from the state of Massachusetts.

He was supposed to leave Aug. 1. "I thought it was all over," he said.

Luckily, his undergraduate alma mater, Dartmouth, still had positions open.

His Rwandan excursion is a way for him to give back, he said, but it also will help him stay sharp.

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— Dr. Jim Little Sr.
JACKSON HOLE PEDIATRICIAN

Even at his age, he will have to learn a few new things about health care, including more about malaria, AIDS and tuberculosis.

Little said he will be prepared for whatever is thrown his way.

"You can plan the travel, you can't plan the adventure," he said.

Little will be leaving his Jackson pediatric practice in the capable hands of Dr. Travis Riddell and Dr. Keri Wheeler, he said.

His significant other, Dr. Lisa Ridgway, has been his professional partner since 1989 and also retired this year. Ridgway will not move to Rwanda with Little, but will make the trip to visit him.

LOOKING BACK



45 years ago ...

Phil Baux, recreational director for Teton County, proposed plans to institute a joint city-county recreational program. The board of commissioners pledged \$1,500 toward the project. A partial recreation committee had been elected, and the committee announced plans to build a recreation and park complex on the Miller property. ... Dallas Dunlap, 16, joined the U.S. Alpine Ski Team. She prepared by skiing Snow King mountain every evening. ... Season ski pass prices for the Jackson Hole Ski Area were announced. Unlimited use of all lifts during the season cost \$175. A "B" ticket, good for chairlifts seven days a week and trams on all days except Saturdays, Sundays and certain holidays, cost \$100. A ticket good for chairlifts seven days a week cost \$56.50 for adults and \$36 for kids in 12th grade and below. The advertisement stated that ticket prices reflected an adjustment based on demand.

30 years ago ...

The Teton County School District was in the process of bringing its schools up to new fire code standards set by the state. A total of 36 remaining violations were set to be completely remedied by January. ... A series of lectures and demonstrations on relaxation were held at the Americana Snow King Resort. The lectures were led by Robert Frost, who studied the Alexander technique of reducing stress by inducing relaxation during tense moments. The event was sponsored by the Royal Teton Center for Wholistic Studies. ... Plans for the Jackson Community Choral Society were unveiled at a meeting of the Jackson Hole Fine Arts Guild. The choral society's president was Dave Young, secretary was Joanne Hennes and treasurer was Judith Chalfant. The group's first concert was set for Dec. 21. ... A letter to the editor proposed that Jackson be renamed Jaxon. Laurel A. Wicks wrote, "We need a name that suits the times, one which is modern, American, efficient, a vision of the new West." ... A Teton County jury composed of 10 women and two men found Paul Haase not guilty of first-degree sexual assault. Haase, a rig supervisor for Amoco Oil near Granite Creek, was charged with raping a young female rig worker. After four days of testimony, the jury reached a verdict in just 1 hour and 15 minutes. ... The National Audubon Society offered a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of grizzly bear poachers.

15 years ago ...

The epidemic of 1918 was remembered as a devastating influenza force. More than 20 people died of the Spanish Flu that year. The population of Jackson Hole in 1918 was 350. If the outbreak had been proportional to the population in 1997, the death toll would have exceeded 1,000. ... Teton County citizens participating in the fifth annual Cardiac Arrest fundraiser were incarcerated in a faux jailhouse and solicited donations to use as bail. Participants raised \$13,150 for the American Heart Association. ... County commissioners voted 3-2 against a zone change for the development of a 40-acre modular home subdivision in the Hog Island area. Phil Wilson proposed the plan to help support the working class. He said the area could support up to 90 mobile homes, but he had not provided testing data on whether the area's soil could accommodate septic systems required for the development. Rather than receiving a denial from the commission that would have prevented him from returning with a new plan for one year, Wilson chose to withdraw his plan.