

# Our Town

Milpitas' most unique and inspirational personalities

## Eyes Draw Doctor Abroad

Head of Kaiser's Ophthalmology Department travels to rural communities overseas with teams of local nurses and technicians

BY KEN YODER REED

First thing one notices about Kris Karlen is his eyes. Deep blue, like iceberg-melt. Fiercely focused, perhaps his ancestor, with shaggy blond hair like Karlen, was a Viking sailor, staring across the Atlantic waves.

Karlen looks into people's eyes for a living. He cuts open diseased eyes and repairs them. He strips off the milky web of a cataract. He does refractive surgery, using an excimer laser to reshape the eyeball so the patient no longer needs glasses.

Seventy-something Grandma Yaaba was led to his operating table in outback Ghana because she was blind on both sides. When they pulled off the bandages the day after, she saw 20/40. Good enough to drive in California. She began to scream: "I can see! I can see! I want to marry that Dr. Karlen." The clinic nurses appreciated her joy but shushed her. "You can't. He's got a wife back in America." "I'll be his second wife. I'll cook for him!"

Satisfied customers like Yaaba make Dr. Karlen so happy that he eagerly shells out \$2,500 of his own money several times a year for plane tickets to take him to Northwest China, Nigeria, the Caribbean and Ghana, where he works in rural communities, hours from major cities, with traveling teams of local nurses and technicians.

Dr. Karlen also has another, more familiar life. At the Kaiser Permanente office on North Milpitas Boulevard, he heads the Ophthalmology Department, overseeing 12 staff.

"Average day, I treat a patient every 15 minutes — maybe 30 a day. Operating days I do 10, 11 cataracts. The usual stuff. Tear duct surgery. Glaucoma. LASIK."

Medicine was in the blood — his father was a radiologist in his hometown of Bakersfield. It took eight years for Karlen to get through college — he was too busy exploring Greek, Latin, anthropology and the South Pacific. But he finally made up his mind — it was medicine. And then surgery. And then the eye.

Why the eye? "I was in third year of internship rotation, unsure which direction to go. And watching the attending physician do a cataract surgery. I sat right beside him at the microscope and looked down into that eye. So anatomically per-

fect. The lens. The iris. The cornea. It's so..." Karlen struggles for words, rare for him. "Artistic! And that's it. I'm in."

That go-for-it quality captures Karlen. Watching him in action at his Kaiser offices, he's an Obama. Cheerfully yelling greetings across the halls. Energetic, striding. Thin, good-looking in the sparse beard and white surgical smock. Mocking eye infections. "No respect! No respect — this virus! We gotta show it who's boss here!" He humors patients with stories of his travels and his extreme sports — scuba, rock-climbing.

"I like to live on the edge of the envelope." What's that like when it comes to scuba? "The better your skills, the more you can risk. Go into currents. Go into deep caves. Swim with the sharks and rays."

"My patients need me in Milpitas," Karlen said. "But when I'm not here, 15 more doctors as talented as I am will step right up. In Gansu (boondocks China) and Ghana, if I'm not there, it won't happen. Or at least it won't happen for a couple more months."

It's the thought of those patients living in a darkened, eyeless world that drives him to push his own body limits.

"The people were lined up Monday morning," he said, reliving it in his mind's eye. "Maybe 150 of them. And I say, 'Sister (it's a Catholic clinic), what are all these people doing here?' 'They're here to see you,' she says. So we bring them in five at a time. Because it's the rainy season in Ghana, the electricity keeps going out. Finally it's Friday night and I'm going home the next day and I hear patients arguing with the nurses. 'What's wrong?' I say. 'They won't go home!' The nurses are upset. 'We told them they'll have to wait until the next time. They've been in the queue for their cataract surgeries since they met you Monday but we told them.' 'I'll treat everyone I said I would,'" Karlen remembered. "So I'm back Saturday morning and inspect eyes 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. and then we start operating and it's two in the morning when we finish the last one."

"How did you feel?" "Tired. And I was younger back then. I was still 40."

Emma supports his passion for charity doctoring. That's Mrs. Karlen, on whom falls the burden of running the household



Dr. Kris Karlen treats 30 patients a day at Kaiser Permanente's Milpitas ophthalmology offices, and spends several weeks per year abroad providing much-needed eye surgeries in Northwest China, Nigeria, the Caribbean and Ghana.

Photo by Ken Yoder Reed

and managing their two daughters' lives when he's gone on his 14-day charity trips. She's also the director of finance for the City of Milpitas. "She keeps the city solvent," Karlen said.

He's most hopeful about his teenage daughters. "Rachel and Sarah. They're going with me next summer to Ghana. I've cleared it with the clinic there. Rachel asked if she could. She's 17. They'll check vision and such. They have no skills to

offer yet, but ..." Karlen said, "if you can catch the spirit of volunteering early in life!"

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Ken Yoder Reed runs a recruiting business for a living and writes freelance for love. Milpitas is his favorite town west of the Mississippi. Contact him at [kreed@tkophoenix.com](mailto:kreed@tkophoenix.com). "Our Town" will run as a once monthly series, looking at unique individuals in Milpitas.