HEALTH HERO

A World of Difference

A former nurse is diverting medical supplies from landfills to clinics in need.

McLellan checks a patient's blood pressure in a Senegalese clinic.

The sickest patients lay in street clothes on bare mattresses. Others stretched out on the floor of the large ward. A doctor making his rounds bent over to examine one patient's wound, then retaped it with the same dressing before moving on to the next patient without changing his gloves. Nearby, old glass syringes waited on a dirty white tray. As the doctor explained to Elizabeth McLellan, an American nurse visiting the hospital in Quetta, Pakistan, he didn't have basics like linens, disposable needles, or gauze. McLellan, who was working as the director of nursing for a Saudi Arabian hospital, thought, *Someday, when I'm back in the U.S., I'm going to do something about this.*

In 2007, she kept her promise by devising a simple solution to help the desperately ill-equipped clinics she'd seen in Asia and Africa. She knew that to limit infections, U.S. medical centers discard unused supplies from patient and operating rooms. As a result, it's estimated that hospitals pay a combined $10 billion in disposal fees every year to unload more than 2.5 million tons of trash, much of which ends up in landfills. By diverting some of it, McLellan realized she could help hospitals cut costs and reduce waste while providing supplies to facilities that would otherwise go without.

She stationed cardboard boxes in the storage rooms of the hospital in Portland, Maine, where she worked, asking nurses and housekeepers to collect unused supplies. The boxes quickly overflowed with catheters, syringes, and gowns, which McLellan loaded into her car. Her cellar began filling with wound care materials, as well as wheelchairs and crutches. Soon her house was stuffed with 11,000 pounds of goods—with just enough room for a path to the door.

In 2009, McLellan rented a warehouse and founded a nonprofit, Partners for World Health (PWH). Today, she, her staff of six, and hundreds of volunteers gather supplies from a network of New England hospitals, sort them at four warehouses, and ship them abroad. McLellan also leads missions to educate doctors and nurses on surgery, primary healthcare, and cancer prevention.

On one such trip in 2012, she worked at a tent clinic in the mountains outside Cusco, Peru. It was dusk when a woman arrived with her 7-year-old son. Four years earlier, he had broken his leg. Untreated, it set improperly, leaving him unable to walk. His mother pushed him for miles in a wheelbarrow, arriving just before the clinic closed—and just after McLellan had stowed a walker in her truck. "I saw her and said, 'Oh my God, I think we need our walker!'" McLellan says. The boy was grinning as he began slowly moving along with his new device.

In 2018, PWH distributed an estimated 250,000 pounds of equipment during missions, via overseas shipments, and within the U.S. ("PWH allows us to provide clients with costly materials that aren't covered by insurance, like incontinence supplies, which can greatly improve quality of life," says Meredith Anderson, a program manager for the nonprofit Southern Maine Agency on Aging.)

McLellan tells her young volunteers: "Make a commitment to something greater than your own self-interests. If we all did that, we would make a huge difference in our country—and our world." **–MARY PAULINE LOWRY**

> *How could I throw this stuff away when there were so many people in the world who could use it?*
>
> **–ELIZABETH McLELLAN**