

A P R
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MediSend International is training technicians to repair biomedical equipment in developing countries



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It's their first trip to America, the only time either has ever been out of poverty-stricken Haiti.

And, yes, both Luxon Philogene and Phanel Guerrier are a little homesick after being away from their families and friends for three months.

But both are exactly where they want to be right now — halfway through a cutting-edge biomedical equipment repair training program in Dallas.

The six-month MediSend International boot camp could help them save lives back home.

“In Haiti, we don't have the equipment or the means to repair it,” said Guerrier, 32, whose halting English belies his curious intellect.

“This program will teach me how to repair the equipment. And when I get back home, the situation will be different.”

His compatriot, Philogene, is equally anxious to put his new skills and knowledge to the test in an impoverished nation further devastated by last year's earthquake.

“This training is very, very challenging,” said Philogene, 28, an engineering student in his homeland. “I've learned so many things.

“When I get back, I hope I can find some equipment and start [teaching] how to use them,” he said.

The Haitian duo is part of an impressive 12-member class of trainees from developing countries around the world, including Nigeria, Chad, Togo, Cameroon and Papua New Guinea.

They all study in a state-of-the-art laboratory tucked away in a small corner of northeast Dallas, a street where a Japanese seafood market and a post office command most of the drive-by public's attention.

This is the international headquarters of MediSend, a global humanitarian organization founded in 1990.

When it began, MediSend's core mission was to collect surplus medical supplies and equipment from hospitals, clinics, manufacturers and distributors. Then it would package and ship the vital necessities to reputable caregivers in developing countries.

But experience, indeed, is the greatest teacher. After 16 years, MediSend learned a critical lesson that would broaden their mission: The life-saving equipment sent to these poor countries often wasn't utilized because not enough people knew how to properly use or repair it.

That epiphany came on a 2005 trip to a pediatric hospital in Angola, said Nick Hallack, the savvy and energetic president and chief executive officer of MediSend.

"We saw kids sitting under a tree waiting to get into an emergency room," Hallack said. "It was like a living wailing wall. And it just didn't sit right with us. Their kids are just as beautiful to them as our kids are to us."

The doctor there explained that the bleak situation was made worse by inoperable equipment that few, if any, technicians were trained to repair.

"It was like this huge light-bulb moment," said Hallack.

A year later, thanks to the generous support of ExxonMobil, the Biomedical Training Repair Program was established. In early 2007, the first wave of meticulously screened trainees began arriving at MediSend's Global Education Center. Dozens have graduated since as certified biomedical technicians.

The training doesn't come cheap, which — hint, hint — means MediSend always welcomes more sponsors.

Hallack estimates that the comprehensive six-month training program costs MediSend \$75,000 to \$80,000 per student. That includes an English-language immersion program and a Red Cross first-aid course for trainees. Then they can get down to the business of learning in a lab that boasts a computer-assisted training system that the U.S. military uses to teach electronics.

"We are the MIT of biomedical training," Hallack said. "We set the standard."

The trainees are housed in apartments close to the lab, but they also must learn how to shop, cook and clean for themselves. It's a lot of work. But you won't hear any of the trainees complain. They know the program will enrich their lives and enable them, as skilled technicians, to provide better medical care in their communities.

It's the culmination of a dream for Philogene.

"I have a strong desire to troubleshoot, to repair," he said. As a budding teen, Philogene was fond of disassembling electronic devices and putting them back together again.

"My grandmother [would] say, 'You want to be a technician, because all the time you take things apart,'" said Philogene. "So I always had this in my mind — to become an engineer."

He's worked and studied hard to make that happen. So has Guerrier, who became interested in biomedical equipment four years ago when he worked as a driver for a hospital. He watched the technician work and wanted to learn.

"So one day, I spoke with the director of the medical department and he said, 'You can train next summer,'" said Guerrier. "So I became a driver and biomedical technician helper."

With remarkable smarts and persistence, he earned his way into the MediSend training program that promises to alter the trajectory of his career.

“I’m feeling very, very special,” he said. “The skills and experience I’ve gotten here, I haven’t had before. It means something to me; it means something for all of Haiti.”

The last point is one we should keep in mind: Dallas-based MediSend is touching lives in more ways than one.

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