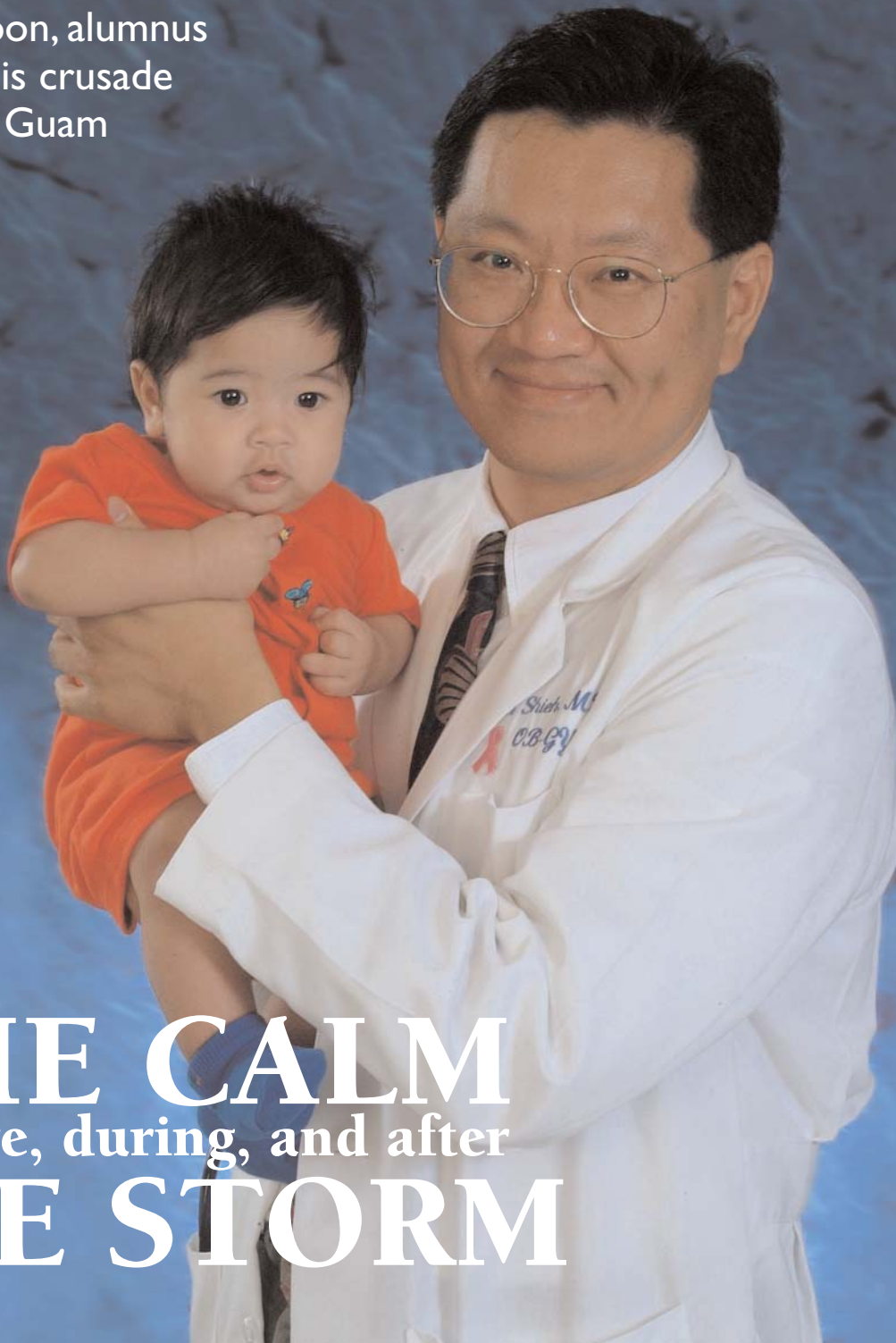


# ALUMNI NEWS

Summer 2003



Amid typhoon, alumnus  
continues his crusade  
to improve Guam  
community



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# THE CALM BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER THE STORM

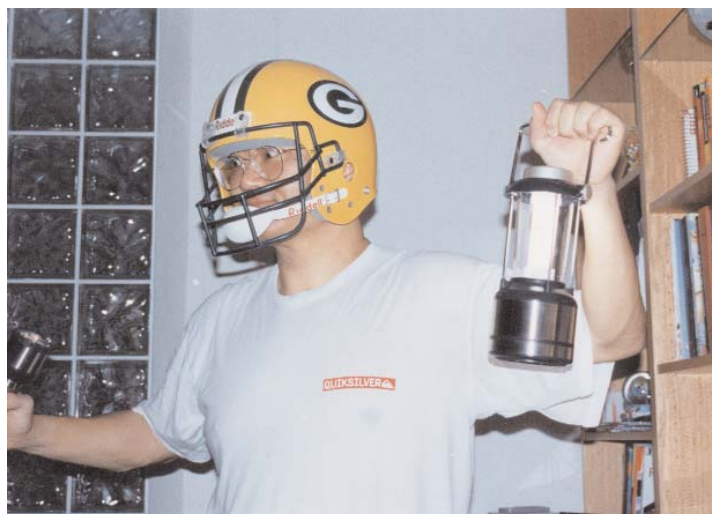
The South Pacific winds were gaining the ferocity they would later need to flip over trucks and tear holes in homes as **Thomas Shieh, MD '92**, climbed back into his truck, cake in hand.

It was Dec. 8, 2002, Dr. Shieh's daughter Tiffany's 13th birthday, and the typhoon that was beginning to spin ruinous circles around the island of Guam was not going to prevent him from getting home to his family. The birthday celebration, however, would not go on as planned.

An obstetrician/gynecologist in the small city of Tamuning, Dr. Shieh was coming home from a morning visit to his hospitalized expectant mothers. Typhoon readiness procedure on Guam dictates that patients 36 weeks pregnant or those at high risk be placed in the hospital. Of the 80 pregnant women in the hospital that day, eight were Dr. Shieh's patients. One woman gave birth to a healthy child an hour before Dr. Shieh left in the early afternoon to pick up a birthday cake for his daughter and make certain his entire family was safe during what he knew from experience was going to be hell.

Dr. Shieh cannot go to the store or the mall without seeing at least three or four of his patients. He greets them with a smile, and they strike up conversations. They invite him to their homes for parties and keep him posted about their lives well after the day he helps them become new parents. Such is the open-Invita-

## Amid typhoon, alumnus continues his crusade to improve Guam community



Thomas Shieh, MD '92, dons an autographed Green Bay Packers helmet, a gift from another Medical College alumnus, for protection from wind and debris before going outside to start his generator during the height of Supertyphoon Pongsona.

tion mentality of the Guam community, and it fits Dr. Shieh's personality to the letter.

Medicine on the island of 140,000 people follows a similar vein. Tamuning has a community-based hospital that takes all patients, regardless of ability to pay. Although Dr. Shieh does practice at the hospital, his efforts are concentrated on his private practice, the Shieh Clinic, which he opened in January 2000.

What he describes as the best reward of having a private practice – being able to reach out to his patients without obstruction, and developing trust – is also what has made his clinic so successful and his services highly sought on the island.

"I provide them with my pager, my home phone, my e-mail, my cell phone number, and they can contact me anytime," said Dr. Shieh who also speaks Mandarin and Taiwanese. "I get to know every one of my patients and their family members."

Part of Dr. Shieh's outreach was creating a Web site to augment his clinic services. "With the technology of the World Wide Web, I feel that medicine is changing at a faster pace than anticipated, even on Guam," he said. "Patients want to access information before coming to see you."

Per his design, the Web site has evolved into as much a community resource as a medical resource. Aside from outlining all the clinic's services, a visitor to the site can find information on maternity clothes, birthing stories, baby pictures, youth sports, teen pregnancy stories, insurance primers and even typhoon tracking data.

The bottom line is arming people with information, particularly women. "Women are very different from men... They seem to take care of themselves better than men," he said. "I feel that they want to read about their health care. They want information about their bodies. They want to know what is happening when they have a baby or are trying to conceive.

"My philosophy is 'provide them with as much information as possible, so

they can educate themselves and thus be autonomous in making their medical decisions.'"

Dr. Shieh said living with three ladies in his house also helps him remain aware of women's needs.

Inside their home, Dr. Shieh; his wife, Raven; Tiffany; and their oldest daughter, Beverly, battled the rainwater that was beginning to leak through the window cracks, doors and up through the floor. "We were mopping up the rain, but Mother Nature always wins," Dr. Shieh said.

Although Guam was affected by a large typhoon just five months earlier, the last storm of this magnitude to hit the island was Supertyphoon Paka in 1997.

About 3:45 p.m., the Shiehs' bedroom window shattered, and rain began pouring in like high tide. Within five minutes, the house was flooded, but still the family continued cleaning up the water. While the roaring wind subjugated other sound, and the rain drove horizontally into the side of the building as if sprayed from a colossal hose, Dr. Shieh called the hospital every hour to make sure all of his patients were still secure. His patients say one of their doctor's greatest traits is his ability to make them feel comfortable, regardless of the circumstances.

Dr. Shieh was a senior at Moanalua High School in Honolulu when his grandmother Shieh Su Ying was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Despite moving to Hawaii from his native Taiwan at age 10, Dr. Shieh kept in very close contact with his grandmother, who stood as his example of how to contribute to a community.

Just before she died, she discussed with her grandson his career plans.

"'Medicine,' she said. 'Medicine is your future. Go to medical school, be a doctor – that is the best thing you can do for people. When you set up your practice, make sure you can allow time to help those people who need help,'" Dr. Shieh recalled. "It was with her encouragement and untimely death that helped me focus



Dr. Shieh with his wife, Raven (lower right), and his daughters, Tiffany (upper left) and Beverly.

and set goals of becoming a physician."

Although he spoke no English when he moved to the U.S., Dr. Shieh graduated summa cum laude from Chaminade University of Hawaii and soon faced a decision of where to attend medical school. He interviewed at schools in California, New York and Hawaii, but none had the family-oriented feel he sought. (He was now married with a 1-year-old daughter). But the Medical College of Wisconsin offered the environment and the early clinical exposure he wanted.

"When I visited Wisconsin and MCW, that was it," he said. "From the moment I arrived at the airport and the medical school, I was greeted in a manner that left me with an impression that I was already part of the MCW family."

One of Dr. Shieh's strongest memories from the Medical College is his first patient contact. He realized a woman he was interviewing at a local senior citizen home reminded him of his grandmother. They talked for hours, and it confirmed for him that helping patients is the ultimate goal of medical education.

The Wisconsin winter was also a memorable experience. "I was coming from Hawaii where the temperature was always in the 80s, and all of a sudden it was -10 with a 'wind chill factor.' What is that? Well, my walk from the parking lot educated me right away. I was wearing layers of clothes and a ski mask, and it

still felt like needles hitting me. The funny thing is, I loved it!"

Dr. Shieh made lifelong friends at the Medical College. He remains close with **William Pao, MD '83**, a radiation oncologist at St. Luke's Medical Center. They met at the YMCA where their children were taking the same classes.

Even though obstetricians often work the longest hours of any specialty, Dr. Shieh really liked delivering babies, so Dr. Pao encouraged his friend to pursue the field. Dr. Shieh was mature for his age and outgoing, Dr. Pao said.

Despite their distance apart, the Paos and Shiehs still visit. Over one Christmas, they even went to Green Bay for a Packers game (the coldest game of the decade). Dr. Shieh is a huge fan.

"He is very dedicated to his work and patients," Dr. Pao said. "He really cares about his family, especially his two girls. He is very bright and a quick learner. ... For example, he didn't know how to play golf when we met, but in four years, he was the champion at the Kapiolani Hospital golf outing, beating out many attending physicians. Tom is very gregarious and has good business sense. I know of several doctors in Milwaukee that would like to hire him as an associate."

By degrees, Supertyphoon Pongsona (as it was named) broke down the elements of modern life and survival on Guam. At 4 p.m., the power at Dr. Shieh's house went out, forcing the family to work by flashlights and candles. At 6 p.m., the radio signal was severed, a rare occurrence indicative of only the strongest storms. In Tamuning, they waited for the eye of the typhoon to pass over, perhaps giving people a chance to go outside and start their generators. But the eye missed the city, and instead, the wall of the typhoon – which packs the strongest winds – struck the area. The weather center's wind gauge was knocked out of commission after winds reached 150 mph.

At 10:30 p.m., with winds still at 80 to 100 mph, Dr. Shieh decided he had to get outside to start the family's generator.

"This is when I looked to my book shelf and found my Green Bay Packers helmet, the one Dr. Pao gave me for Christmas autographed by Sterling Sharpe," he said. "I thought if I was going to go outside, I better wear some protective equipment. So, I slipped on the Packers helmet and outside I went."

Dr. Shieh's excursion to the generator gave them power for the night. At 2 a.m., the family gave up trying to fight the flood and went to bed.

Before being stationed there, Dr. Shieh did not know where Guam was. A U.S. Navy scholarship had financed his medical education, and he got orders to report to active duty as a lieutenant commander during his last year in OB/GYN residency at the University of Hawaii.

He spent four years at the Naval Hospital Guam. He was Chief of Gynecology during the last two. As a physician in a forward-deployed hospital, Dr. Shieh had to stand ready to care for all active duty personnel during time of war or emergencies. He was part of the command that cared for patients during the Korean air crash, he cared for Kurdish refugees and was deployed to Okinawa and other locales for medevacs.

When his active duty was up, the Navy wanted Dr. Shieh to sign on for two more years. He, however, was developing other ambitions. He had offers to return to Hawaii and work with former colleagues, but Guam was beginning to feel familiar, and the people embraced his presence. Local colleagues and patients encouraged him to remain on Guam and open a practice.

"I decided to stay on Guam because of the people here," he said. "I felt that I could make more of a difference for the people on this island than anywhere else. The patients are great, they are appreciative, and they make me feel like I am a doctor that they trust. And it makes me feel like this is where MCW and my residency and my grandmother would want me to practice medicine. I am now making a difference."

Among the more than 3,000 babies he has delivered in his career, 1,400 have been on Guam, including the very first U.S. baby of the new millennium.

Practicing medicine at the standard of care for which he is trained, however, remains the largest challenge of his career. Guam is a United States territory, yet is an eight-hour plane ride from the nearest U.S. state, Hawaii. The latest equipment and medications are not always available, and the island is lacking some subspecialties. Subsequently, Dr. Shieh is currently working to link Guam Hospital's telemedicine to University of Hawaii Kapiolani Medical Center's telemedicine project to coordinate lectures and consults for maternal, neonatal and pediatric consults. Already, general surgeons on Guam have performed brain surgery via telemedicine consult and stabilized the patient for transport to Hawaii.

Beginning to end, Supertyphoon Pongsona lasted 14 hours. Sustained winds of 150 mph with gusts reaching 184 mph destroyed 2,000 houses, leaving 3,500 people homeless. Hundreds of people were injured, and one death was attributed to the storm. The following day, President George W. Bush declared Guam a federal disaster area.

The storm was over when Dr. Shieh awoke at 6 a.m. to call the hospital and make plans to go in for rounds. Outside, he saw homes – made of concrete with "typhoon-proof" shutters – ripped apart as if they had been wood. Concrete utility poles were snapped, and a fire raged at the city's fuel storage facility.

"It was a horrible sight," Dr. Shieh said. "It was like in the movies, as if a nuclear bomb went off, all the trees down, cars smashed, stacked on top of each other, windows in buildings all shattered, like a war zone."

The typhoon changed everything. "Life came to a halt," Dr. Shieh said. "We had to live without power, without water. I think the worst is without water. Power, well, we have some generators, but they don't last forever either."

Large water tanks were made available at the hospital and clinics, so physicians could continue to perform life-saving measures in surgery and keep the facilities clean, but residents had no showers, no flushing toilets.

Near the equator, Guam has temperatures averaging 85 to 93 degrees year-round. Without power, there is no air conditioning. On top of it all, the fuel tanks that had exploded at the port caused a gas shortage. The governor issued a curfew to keep people from stampeding to the few gas stations not destroyed by the storm.

"All of a sudden, the streets were bare, however, that is a problem for patients," Dr. Shieh said. "Without gas, how are they supposed to get to the clinics and hospitals for care? There are not enough ambulances to pick up every patient. I had to use my own vehicle to do some house calls, which was an experience I will never forget."

Dr. Shieh's motivation in life is his family. "Without my wife, my daughters, I would be lost," he said. It was the '70s when he met his future wife, Raven, in Honolulu. They attended the same high school, were married while attending college together and had Beverly, who is now 16. She wants to enter the field of medicine herself, and Dr. Shieh plans on bringing her back to the Medical College someday.

His teen-age daughters' interest in sports, particularly volleyball, prompted Dr. Shieh to rally the community. Guam's public schools were not going to have any sports in 2002 due to debts and budget shortfalls. Dr. Shieh formed a committee, which developed a format for the public schools to compete against the private schools. The committee was a success, and interscholastic sports were saved.

Dr. Shieh often comes to the aid of local youth. He continues to sponsor his own annual volleyball tournament. He also created the Shieh Su Ying Scholarship Fund to honor his grandmother and provide tuition assistance to high school students.



Dr. Shieh demonstrates how finger sticks are used to test people registering to donate bone marrow. Dr. Shieh organized a bone marrow donor registration drive on Guam to save a 5-year-old girl dying of leukemia. The drive registered 3,409 donors in 24 hours. Justice Taitague died as soon as the drive ended, but Dr. Shieh said thanks to her strength and spirit, many lives will be saved in the future.

Dr. Shieh is a leader in the medical community as well. He is the newest President of the Guam Medical Society. His priorities include conducting outreach programs such as health fairs, teen pregnancy prevention and tobacco and alcohol prevention programs; beginning premedical clubs at all local high schools; and advancing continuing medical education on the island. Legislatively, he and the Society are lobbying for a patient bill of rights, tort reform and better care for the indigent. And with the destruction on the island, more people than ever are in need.

Crisis turned to contingency in the wake of the disaster. Physicians like Dr. Shieh took on atypical tasks for the welfare of the community. Dr. Shieh ran his clinic on an emergency basis in the days following the typhoon. He allowed patients to visit the clinic without an appointment and without being obligated to pay for services at the time.

Dr. Shieh used the radio as a medium to keep all patients informed of the state of health care clinics and the hospital. He made more than 12 house calls to see patients unable to travel under the circumstances. He kept civil defense informed of the medical community's needs. He traveled around town, handing out baby for-

mula to families, making sure they had bottled water, too. He donated fruit, and he assisted in the hospital's emergency room to ease the patient load there.

With his prodding, government officials finally recognized doctors as critical personnel, entitled to the scarce gasoline available, thus allowing him and his peers to take the first critical steps toward recovery of the island.

Dr. Shieh predicted it will take about two years for Guam to recover to 100 percent, and that is an optimistic estimate and dependent on getting a break from Mother Nature.

Dr. Shieh, though, has taken no break. One month after the typhoon, he organized the first-ever bone marrow donor registration drive on Guam in the hopes of saving the life of 5-year-old Justice Taitague, a resident there. The overwhelming community response resulted in the previously under-represented Pacific Islander population increasing by 80 percent on the national registry.

To everyone's dismay, Justice died the day after the drive, but Dr. Shieh considers her a hero for the way she brought the community together. He is a lot like her in this way – calm, caring and selfless in the face of the storm. ❖