

The Gift of Walking

Club member Robert Veith, M.D., uses his medical expertise to help give people freedom through footsteps

BY STACY BOOTH

He first went to Vietnam in 2002, a change from his original vacation plans of hiking in Nepal. But when the opportunity for humanitarian work presented itself, he figured it was a good time to start. He was single, and both his children were at college, so he went. Since that first trip, he's returned to Vietnam four more times and traveled to Bangladesh once.

Rob Veith, a Club member since 1984, might have had medicine in his genes. His grandfather and an uncle were doctors, and his brother, sister, and a few nieces and nephews are working in the medical field or training

for a career in medicine. He graduated from Stanford University and attended medical school at the University of Washington, where he also completed his orthopedic surgery residency. While he started working in trauma at Harborview Medical Center, Rob soon found himself doing more and more non-emergency foot and ankle surgery.

It was through one of his mentors, Dr. Ernest Burgess, that Rob first heard about the Prosthetics Outreach Foundation. Ernest had founded the program in 1989 in order to provide prosthetic limbs to the people of Vietnam who had lost legs during the Vietnam War. "After my first trip I joined the Prosthetics

Outreach Foundation as a means to make sure I could go back and do some more work," says Rob. Now, he is the vice president of the board of directors.

The nonprofit has expanded to help people in Vietnam, Bangladesh and Sierra Leone who would not otherwise receive treatment for amputations, limb deformities or accidents that leave them unable to walk. According to the POF's Web site, the foundation has helped more than 13,000 amputees walk again.

Rob says the majority of surgeries are now correcting congenital deformities and amputations from burns and

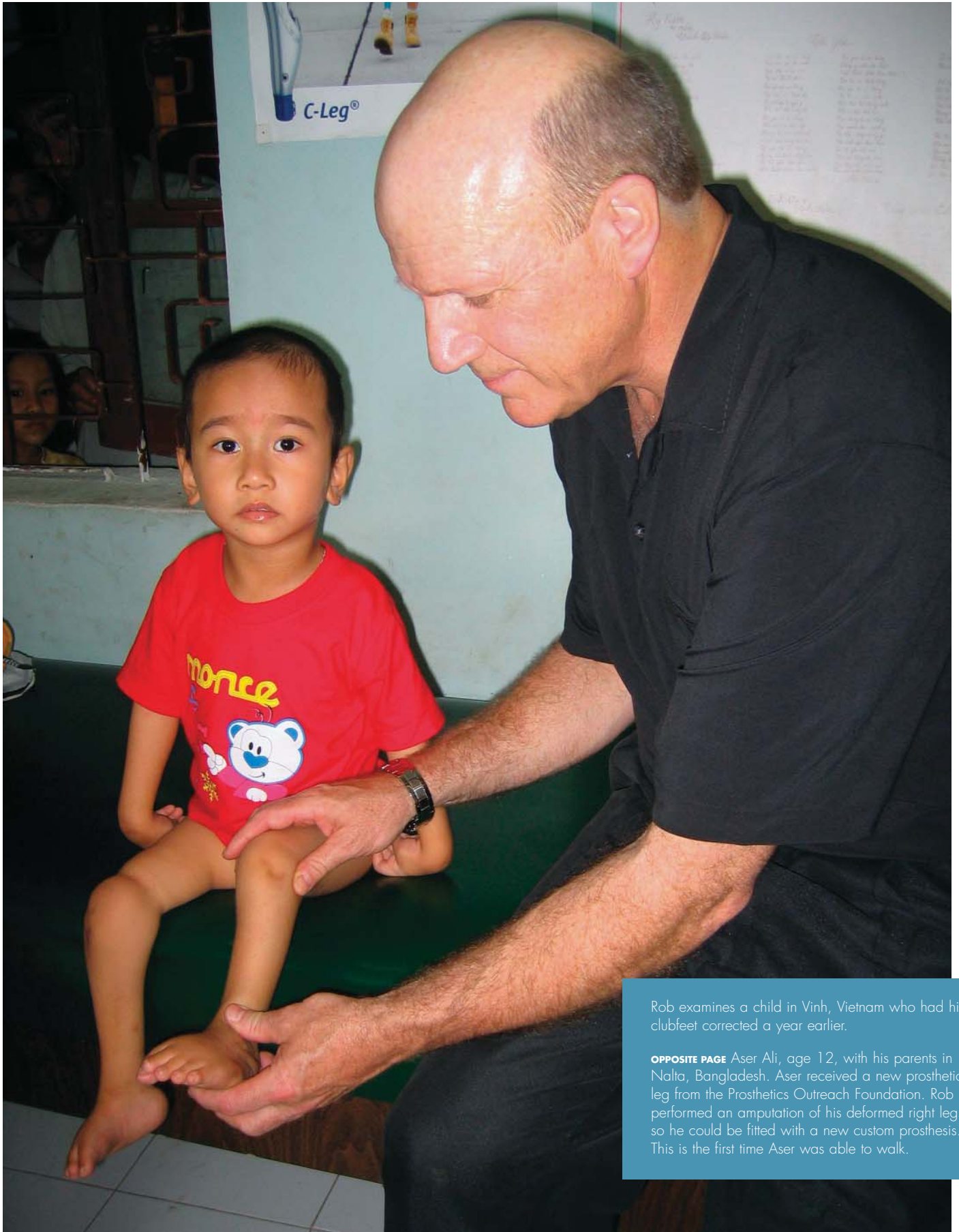
traffic accidents. "We call it the gift of walking," he says. Amputations from land mines and war injuries are less common than when the program first started. "Most of what we do now is foot and ankle surgery in poor people that can't afford it, which is most of the population," he says. Currently, there is a push to improve the care of clubfoot deformity. About one person per thousand is born with a clubfoot, and while it is diagnosed and treated from birth in the United States, in Vietnam the problem is frequently untreated, creating a public health problem. With clubfoot, children and adults can't work in the fields and young women cannot get married. "What we're trying to do now is improve the awareness and early diagnosis of this deformity," Rob says.

During his trip to northern Vietnam in May, Rob and another surgeon were able to treat 36 patients. The surgeries are performed alongside Vietnamese doctors, anesthesiologists and nurses. "They're very intelligent, very thoughtful people, but they just do not have resources we take for granted here," Rob says. He takes most of the supplies he'll need in surgery with him when he travels—often going a few pounds over the luggage weight limit—but "fortunately, foot and ankle surgery doesn't require tons of equipment," he says.

His last trip in November was to Son La, Vietnam, in the mountainous northwest region of the country. It was his first trip alone. "Usually, I'm with at least one other doctor, but I'm all by myself, which will be fine because I'm pretty experienced in most of the stuff," he says. Rob explains he is lucky in that he has some training in treating conditions like polio, which was wiped out much more recently in Vietnam than in America. There are many teenagers and young adults with deformities from polio who need surgery.

Rob used all his vacation time this year to do surgeries in Vietnam, but for him, it's worth it. "The families are so appreciative of what you're doing. It's very endearing, watching these little children climb up on the operating table to have their surgery. And these kids after surgery are so tough, so strong. I never see anybody crying over there. Then when they wave goodbye and they've got their little casts on, it's just a total rush. I'm going to do it as long as I can do it." He says now the program is





Rob examines a child in Vinh, Vietnam who had his clubfeet corrected a year earlier.

OPPOSITE PAGE Aser Ali, age 12, with his parents in Nalta, Bangladesh. Aser received a new prosthetic leg from the Prosthetics Outreach Foundation. Rob performed an amputation of his deformed right leg so he could be fitted with a new custom prosthesis. This is the first time Aser was able to walk.

structured so that he can return to the same place in Vietnam yearly and really watch patients he's treated. Through the POF, after patients have surgery or receive a prosthetic limb, Vietnamese doctors do all follow-up work.

For those patients that do need a limb, they receive a brand-new custom limb made with local materials by local people who have been trained to do it. A limb costs around \$300 to make, and young patients receive new limbs as they grow. For many of these people, it is the first time they will walk on their own.

Patients have to go through a selection process, which often starts with the POF's clinic director in Hanoi named Rose Hong, who Rob calls "the Mother Theresa of Northern Vietnam." She helps determine if their needs are something the surgeons will be able to fix, and gathers the most likely candidates for the surgeons to visit with during their trip. From there, the doctors choose those patients they have the time and equipment to treat. There are always more people than time, and that is something Rob says keeps him returning. "We're treating children who would not be able to afford surgery and would not actually be able to get surgery unless we were there to provide it for them. So we have a little bit of responsibility to keep going back. I know we've barely scratched the surface."

Although Rob has made one trip to Bangladesh and wants to return, he says he has a particular fondness for Vietnam: "I was a student during the Vietnam War, but it touched our lives in such a profound way in those years, even as a student." He says the people of Vietnam are "very hardworking and warm," and he likes being able to give back a little bit.

The hardest parts about his trips for the POF are the number of people who need help and the worries about surgery outcomes. "We have normal anxieties about whether we're going to do a good job or not. When we go there we treat them as if they're anyone here. We try to do as perfect a job as we can."



Rob says it can sometimes be hard, as the medical facilities are so limited. For example, in the United States there is an X-ray machine in the operating room, but in Vietnam, this is unheard of. "We have to kind of go back in time a little bit and make the best of a tough situation. We want to make sure that our patients are only made better."

Besides getting to help people in need, Rob says he does enjoy exploring the country. In addition to Vietnam and Bangladesh, he has traveled recently to Germany, Italy and France, and in the United States, often spends time in San Francisco visiting his son, who is in law school. Rob says he's logged many hours in the Club's pool. He has scaled Mount Rainier, Mount Adams and Mount Si—too many times to count—completed the Seafair triathlon and frequently bikes to work in Renton from his downtown Bellevue condo during summer. Even with all these hobbies, however, Rob says helping the poor is his passion. "It keeps me going ... knowing that if we are not there to perform the surgery, the children and adults will never receive the care needed to help them walk and lead a more normal life."



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

Rob and his children, Emily and Joey, who are both attending law school.

Children wave goodbye on the orthopedic ward in Vinh, Vietnam. The children are all recovering from surgery. The boy in the wheelchair received a corrective amputation that will allow him to be fitted for a new, custom prosthesis, giving him the ability to walk and lead a more-normal life.

Rob works side by side with Vietnamese surgeons and nurses during his trips. Here, he is teaching them while performing corrective surgery on a child with a clubfoot deformity. The Vietnamese surgeons care for patients post-operatively.

Rob is pictured on post-operative rounds with a 5-year-old girl with cerebral palsy who required surgical lengthening of her Achilles tendon.

Rob enjoys swimming, cycling and mountain climbing. He has climbed Mount Rainier, Mount Adams, and is pictured here at the summit lookout of Granite Mountain near Snoqualmie Pass.



For more information about the
Prosthetics Outreach Foundation,
visit the web site at:

WWW.POFSEA.ORG