



In Sierra Leone, David Parker, MD, looked at the public health issue of finding adequate drinking water.

PHOTO BY DAVID PARKER, MD

# Issue-driven photography

BY LINDA PICONE

David Parker, MD, MPH, is known as a researcher in public health, but he's found that taking photographs offers satisfaction—and a way to get messages across—that research papers don't always provide.

Parker, senior physician investigator with HealthPartners Institute, was looking at issues of child labor in 1991 for the Minnesota Department of Health. "Initially, I was running Occupational and Health programs at the Minnesota Department of Health. My goal was just to document the nature and extent of child labor locally, and I set about

doing that" he says. "I became interested and wondered what in the heck is going on in the rest of the world?"

He took a trip to Mexico and decided to chronicle his work with photography for a few weeks. "I thought I'd see how it went," he says. "I spent a month and decided that if I took three really good photos during that month, I would keep traveling and taking pictures."

So he did. Since then, he has managed an extended trip virtually every year—MDH and Park-Nicollet gave him a three-month leave of absence and he had "a really wonderful partner" at Park-Nicollet who made it possible for him to take significant time off. What was an experiment, then an avocation, has become an important part of his vocation.

"It turns out there were a lot more people interested in my child labor work than in my research work," he says.

Parker has been to many parts of the world, from Latin America to Southeast

Asia to Africa and more. During a three-month 1993 trip to Nepal, India and Thailand, he got interested in leprosy and photographed people with the disease. He's photographed immunization clinics in Sierra Leone. His last big trip, to Nepal a couple of years ago, he photographed brick workers. "I'm very interested in relationship between brick work and silica and silicosis and tuberculosis," he says, and he's thinking about putting his photos and research into a book. A few of the

photos from that trip are now hanging on the wall at HealthPartners.

He's able to take photos of people who may be in difficult situations because, he says, he does it in a respectful way. "I'm pretty good at going into places, and people sort of like me," he says. "Part of it is just being willing to hang out with people, to get to know them."

And he's willing to walk away if someone objects. "There's always another photo, other people."

Parker has published several books, three of them featuring his photography. *By These Hands: Portraits from the Factory Floor*, published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press, is still available, but the other two, *Stolen Dreams* and *Before Their Time* are harder to find, he says. Recently he's had photographs displayed at the Minneapolis Institute of Art and in the Governor's Mansion in St. Paul. His work also has been the subject of major exhibitions at the Minneapolis Institute of Art and other institutions throughout North America. He has spoken at various conferences, including a recent one where he did a remote presentation for the American College of Occupational Health, which was meeting in Los Angeles.

There will be an exhibit of Parker's photos at the University of Minnesota's Anderson Library, opening February 20, 2020.

The question of what happens with his work after he's taken the photographs is one Parker grapples with. "That's always a tough issue with social documentary work," he says. "And public health is a tougher, more complex kind of thing."

With his first book, *Stolen Dreams*, the audience was not quite what he thought it would be. It was not so much public health professionals as people interested in photography and "it turns out teachers are tremendously interested" in the work to share with students.

Parker is thinking about where and when and how long his next trip will be. His wife, Mary Parker, a retired librarian, goes on some trips with him, but not all of them. He works part-time now, and retirement from his "day job" is likely not that far away. But in terms of his photography, he says, "I'm hoping to keep doing it for a really long time." MM

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Photographing people with leprosy in Nepal, India and Thailand was the focus of a three-month trip.

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