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Healing hearts: Amber Gray dodges danger as she dedicates her life to serving those destroyed by hate

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Photo: **Bringing change:** Children in Darfur strike a smile for Gray. Gray describes her recent trip to darfur as one of the most rewarding. While there, she held workshops on stress management for humanitarian-aid workers.

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By [Todd Bailey](#) | The New Mexican
 12/1/2007

Since she was young, growing up in Connecticut, Amber Elizabeth Gray always wanted to travel. Her father, Chuck, knew of her desire to see the world, but also knew of her strong sense of justice. That's why he suggested his daughter joined the Peace Corp.

"At that time, that didn't make sense to me," Gray said. "I wasn't sure what he was responding to."

Evidently, fathers do know best. Since 1981, Gray has visited 66 countries. At least half of them, in Southeast Asia, Africa and South America, are considered Third World countries. The humanitarian-aid work that she does also takes away from her Santa Fe-area home for weeks — sometimes months — at a time.

She says she does it because she loves her job, loves helping the souls of so many suffering people.

Jack of all trades

"It's funny, my dad is still trying to figure out what I do," Gray said when asked what name she would give her career.

Gray does many different jobs in working with survivors of human-rights abuses, torture, war, genocide and terrorism. She's a clinician, activist, public-health worker and an educator. She's developed and assessed programs that help victims and humanitarian-aid workers who witness these acts.

"There are lots of facets to the work," Gray said.

She often works with humanitarian-aid workers who need help dealing with the stresses of their jobs.

"A lot of these people see firsthand the human-rights abuses that are going on in these countries," Gray said. "That can damage a person internally and emotionally. I also work with the people from these countries who endure these abuses."

Gray has master's degrees in public health and somatic psychology, with an emphasis in dance/movement therapy. She puts this knowledge

into play — along with her 26 years of experience — when she conducts her workshops and training classes.

"When I went to Rwanda immediately following the genocide in 1994, we got to this place that had been wiped out by land mines," Gray said. "When the kids of this area came out to greet us, they picked up any kind of object they could find and made a rhythm to dance to. This was their way of greeting us."

Gray uses more than clinical psychology in her work. She chooses to use the arts

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and the body in a more "global mode of communication."

"I saw the power in that moment with those children," Gray said. "I've learned to use that type of therapy in my sessions."

In her most recent trip, Gray left Santa Fe for the Darfur region of Sudan on Sept. 21 and returned Oct. 19. For years, the country has been plagued by internal conflicts, leaving many Sudanese without homes. Some have been moved to other towns and forced to live in tents.

During her time in the country, Gray held workshops on stress management with management and human-resource workers, helping them to better understand the impact of stress and how it may contribute to people becoming traumatized.

Her time wasn't all spent in Darfur. She conducted workshops in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum and also in the small town of El Geneina, in west Darfur.

"I was there during one of the worst weeks they have had in a long time," Gray said. "There were a lot of shootings and ambushes. The ambushes went from people being ambushed at gunpoint to being shot in the head, and they were targeting humanitarian workers."

Enduring the fear

Gray lived in Guatemala from 1985-87 during the country's civil war while working with the Peace Corps. She did similar work in the aftermath of El Salvador's civil war. Then there was the work in Rwanda immediately following that country's genocide.

After 26 years, Gray has learned that danger is part of the job. Her desire to help those in need vanquishes her fear.

"She truly has no fear of going to a place that is dangerous," said Gray's husband, Karl Ferguson. "Most of the time, I have to rely on the fact that my wife is very street-smart, and that she is not going to do something stupid."

Ferguson understands Gray's willingness to put her life in danger. The two met in 1989 in Honduras. Ferguson was a Peace Corps volunteer and Gray worked for CARE International, an organization that fights global poverty.

"I think we saw in each other similar beliefs and we both wanted to help similar types of people," Ferguson said. "I understand, firsthand, the work that she does and why she does it. That understanding helps when she is gone for weeks or months. Or when things get really scary."

Ferguson works for the St. Vincent Foundation but has a desire to return to volunteer work abroad. Until then, he has to watch his wife put herself in danger for the right cause. In two instances, Ferguson feared for his wife's life. Both took place in Haiti in 2004.

"She was at an outdoor restaurant when gunfire broke and she called me on her cell phone," Ferguson said. "As the bullets were flying by, I am thinking 'Why did you call me now? I know you want to hear my voice, but there was nothing I can do and it makes me feel totally hopeless.'"

Ferguson felt better 20 minutes later when she called from an acquaintance's home.

The other instance when Ferguson feared for his wife's life was after he read a news article over the Internet while Gray was en route to Haiti.

The story said that "kidnappings in Haiti were up, like, 300 percent," Ferguson said. "She called me when she got there and said some friends had picked her up. For a couple of days, I didn't feel comfortable. We knew many friends who were kidnapped, so that freaked me out."

While Ferguson is well aware of the dangers Gray walks into, her parents are sometimes not told.

"I think it's better that way," said Ferguson. "They're older and there is no reason to have them worrying over her. She does tell them about her more dangerous trips after she returns, though."

The incidents in Darfur heightened Gray's fear. The ambushes were getting worse.

"There were targeting humanitarian workers," Gray said.

One such ambush took place two kilometers from the office where Gray and other workers worked.

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"We had missed the (United Nations) call to go home because there was an outbreak of violence," Gray said. "I learned about (the ambush) that night and I also learned that there was increased sightings of rebels and the militia moving through town, and I remember getting a small surge of adrenaline in my belly."

The next day, the group's debriefing switched from teaching to talking about the situation. The group's members had become anxious.

"People began to talk about (how) when they came, they thought it as relatively safe, and it wasn't," Gray said. "It was really dangerous. There was about 15 minutes where, the only way I can describe it, is that I had a volcano inside of me.

"But I had to keep my emotions under control. I was only there to facilitate, to recommend a program to manage these very type of stress. And inside I am asking myself 'Am I going to get home?' "

Finding an inner peace

The sense of accomplishment she receives from her work is one reason why, after 26 years, the fire inside of her continues to burn. Still, there are two things about her work that tend to get on her nerves.

"Since 9/11, it's been getting harder and harder to travel," Ferguson said. "She also gets frustrated at people who aren't in it for the right reasons."

Most people working in dangerous situations in countries like Sudan, Haiti and Guatemala are there to help make a difference. Those who are there to pad a résumé or boost their egos need not get in Gray's way.

But the work done in these countries torn apart by war and poverty, Gray still finds gratifying. And that satisfaction is usually felt once it's time to return home.

"Reflecting on Darfur, it was some of the most gratifying work I had ever done," Gray said. "I came home more calm and centered and relaxed in helping than before I left. That's why I love doing what I do."

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