

Change, Opportunity, and Balance

In addition to running a New England steel fabrication business, Hollie Noveletsky has a medical career with a global dimension.

THE STRUCTURAL STEEL INDUSTRY has no shortage of well-educated people with advanced degrees, including Hollie Noveletsky, who heads AISC member firm Novel Iron Works in Greenland, N.H. But there's a surprising twist to her credentials; the Ph.D. she earned is in nursing. And even with the demands of running the 54-year-old steel fabrication business, Noveletsky still maintains a small medical practice.

"I love it," she said. "I still do." Specializing in geriatric psychiatry, Noveletsky spends much of her time dealing with dementia, depression and psychosis. Comparing that work to her responsibilities at Novel Iron, she says, "They're so opposite that it gives me balance. I come back here and it's a relief."

Ralph Noveletsky started the firm in 1956, three years before his daughter Hollie was born. He ran the company until his death in 1999. "He was the most wonderful person there was in the world," she said. "He made this company."

"I was in and out of the business over the years," Noveletsky said, "as all the family members have been. I started out as the blueprint girl and the errand girl, then was in and out of the computer room and estimating—while I was in nursing." Those experiences inside the company turned out to be very helpful when she took over the task of running the day to day operations after her father's sudden death.

The steel business was just one of many things Noveletsky learned from her father. Another was the importance of helping others. "My father was a tremendous adventurer and you never had to ask him twice—he was always there for whoever needed him. I just learned by example." In 2005, shortly after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, an interesting opportunity came Noveletsky's way.

"I got an email saying they were looking for volunteers to help with hurricane victims, and I said 'I'll go!' It was an opportunity to help others as well as an adventure." In all she made three trips to the region.

Following those experiences, Noveletsky was ready and willing when she heard about Women for Women of Sierra Leone. The New York-based organization sends volunteer

medical professionals twice a year to operate a two-week free clinic for victims of that country's civil war, which raged from 1991-2002.

"An email came saying they were looking for people to do primary care," she said. "I'm trained in primary care, although I'm really more of a psychiatric care nurse practitioner. But the group organizer said, 'We can use you,' and I said 'I'll go.'"

Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world. Even though diamonds are a plentiful natural resource, their sale as so-called "blood diamonds" provided financing for the country's long and destructive civil war. In addition to turning the nation's infrastructure into ruins, the war left much of the population wounded, mutilated, and generally needy.

Noveletsky spent two weeks in December 2009 in Sierra Leone volunteering at the clinic in the amputee camp, which was set up for people mutilated in the Blood Diamond War.

The clinic is open for just two weeks each in June and December. "We saw patients from morning to well into the night," Noveletsky said. "Sometimes I wouldn't get home until midnight. We were able to address a lot of phantom limb pain, which we could treat using medications the clinic had shipped over from the U.S., and other conditions. And everybody had malaria, including me.

"But those are the loveliest people in the world. I never felt threatened. I felt safe. At the clinic in the other village they would get 100 people waiting. They would travel days on foot to get there and wait for two weeks to be seen. And they all were very appreciative. I'd go back in a heartbeat." And in fact Noveletsky is already planning to return in June 2011.

"I had a really bad year this past year—everybody did. The economy was really bad, I got malaria, my house was damaged by a microburst. It was just one thing after another." After about six months, she said, she knew she needed to go back.

"Doing this volunteer work really puts things in perspective. We have a great life and we have a great country. Despite everything that's going on, despite the economy, regardless of our politics, we have a great country."

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Hollie Noveletsky spent two weeks in December 2009 volunteering in Africa with Women for Women of Sierra Leone, www.wvsl-inc.org, and plans to go again in June. She is the owner of AISC member Novel Iron Works, Greenland, N.H., www.noveliron.com.