More than 20 years ago, Stephen P.
Dunn, MD, FACS, Professor of Pediatric
Surgery at Jefferson, encountered a
young liver transplant patient who had
tavelled from his home in Santa Cruz,
Bolivia, to St. Christopher’s Hospital
for Children. After inquiring why the
boy hadn’t been transplanted in his
home country, Dr. Dunn learned that
while surgeons in Santa Cruz had a
fair amount of experience with kidney
transplants, they were not able to
perform liver transplants. In order
to have these life-saving surgeries,
patients in Santa Cruz needed
to have these life-saving surgeries,
patients in Santa Cruz needed
to assist with operating on the live
donors in Santa Cruz. That first year,
Dr. Maley made the trip four times.
Since then, Dr. Maley has begun
assisting with adult liver transplants,
as well as pediatric recipients. He
asked Dr. Maley if he would be willing
to assist with operating on the live
donors in Santa Cruz. That first year,
Dr. Maley made the trip four times.
Since then, Dr. Maley has begun
assisting with adult liver transplants,
as well as pediatric recipients. Unlike pediatric cases, which
can be planned in advance, there’s no
advance notice for adult transplants.
When a liver becomes available, Dr.
Maley gets a call and starts the long
trip—arriving the following morning to
perform the transplant.

In 2012, Dr. Dunn approached
Warren R. Maley, MD, Professor of
Surgery and Director of Jefferson’s
Live Donor Liver Transplant Program.
Until then, Dr. Dunn had been
handling all of the transplantation
surgeries, operating on live donors
as well as pediatric recipients. He
asked Dr. Maley if he would be willing
to assist with operating on the live
donors in Santa Cruz. That first year,
Dr. Maley made the trip four times.
Since then, Dr. Maley has begun
assisting with adult liver transplants,
as well, but only using deceased
donors. Unlike pediatric cases, which
can be planned in advance, there’s no
advance notice for adult transplants.
When a liver becomes available, Dr.
Maley gets a call and starts the long
trip—arriving the following morning to
perform the transplant.

When we do the pediatric transplants,
we usually stay three or four days to
make sure things are headed in the
right direction,” Dr. Maley explains.
“Every time Dr. Dunn and I go back
to Bolivia, we have the chance to see
the adults and kids we’ve transplanted.
They all come back to the clinic.”

Since pediatric transplants are often
performed while the patients are
babies, he doesn’t really “recognize”
them when they come back to visit
years later. However, he and Dr.
Dunn thoroughly enjoy seeing them
active and vibrant—running, playing
and even flexing their muscles. Adult
patients are equally grateful, with
one serenading the surgeons with his
accordion at a reunion dinner.

Dr. Maley notes that while Santa Cruz
is home to some very wealthy families,
most of its two million residents are
very poor.

“There’s a large population of people
who, if they get sick, can’t afford to go
anywhere else,” he said. In fact, even
with Dr. Dunn and Dr. Maley donating
their services, transplant patients’
families must raise a significant
amount of money to cover other
costs. Many sell the family car or take
on additional jobs to raise the funds.
Dr. Dunn is actively working to find
ways to help bring down those costs.
And both surgeons are focused on
increasing the self-sufficiency of the
local surgeons.

“With each visit, we impart more
expertise to the surgeons there,” he
says. “I think before too long, they
really can be self-sufficient. That
would be tremendously rewarding—
a great accomplishment for everyone
on the team.”

We encourage other surgeons to
to help change that.

While our work in Bolivia may not be solving
the problem globally, it is making a difference
for the physicians and patients there. As
surgeons, we don’t often think about our
skills not being readily available in other
countries. Based on our experiences in
Santa Cruz, we encourage other surgeons to
be open to volunteer opportunities.

Warren R. Maley, MD
Professor of Surgery
Director, Live Donor Liver Transplant Program
Sidney Kimmel Medical College at
Thomas Jefferson University

Stephen P. Dunn, MD, FACS
Professor of Surgery
Chief, Division of Pediatric Solid Organ
Transplantation
Nemours/Alfred I. DuPont Hospital
for Children