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- FROM THE COVER
- LOCAL TALENT
- TEN BEST
- BE THERE
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- WHITE NOISE
- VOICES
- LONGWORTH @ LARGE
- TUNES
- FLICKS
- VISIONS
- CHOW
- HOROSCOPES
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HOME FROM THE COVER HEALING TOUCH, BIG MEDICINE

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## Healing touch, big medicine

By Ogi Overman



Pharmacist Amy Greeson led an expedition in the Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest.

*If Robert Frost took the road less traveled, Amy Greeson has taken the road, the path, the trail, the river, the stream, the tributary and, in many cases, the way where there was not even a road to take. Her life's journey has taken her places where no one in Western civilization has gone before. She*

*has taken the road not traveled, both literally and poetically.*

And, as with Frost, "That has made all the difference."

Greeson is a pioneer, but not a Daniel Boone; an explorer, but not a Columbus; an adventurer, but not a Sir Richard Branson. She is not on the vanguard of a movement — she is the movement. One day there will be others — perhaps many others — but as far as she knows, she and her intrepid crew are the first and only. By profession, Amy Greeson is a pharmacist. She followed her dad's footsteps to UNC, got her degree in that discipline, joined the family pharmacy in Thomasville and began managing her dad's business. For anyone else, that's where the story would've ended. But, instead, the younger Greeson took her knowledge of traditional medicines, her love of the wilderness and her innate desire to help others and began a transformative journey that led to her forming an organization called Healing Seekers.

The project is dedicated to the discovery of indigenous plants, organisms and esoteric therapies that could one day be synthesized into cures for any number of diseases. Given that most medicines have their origins as organic compounds found in nature, she is convinced that there is a wealth of undiscovered (at least by Western medicine) plants with curative properties in the subtropical rainforests of the world. And she has a wealth of information at her fingertips to back up her claim.

"Only one-half of 1 percent of the higher plant species on earth have been extensively studied for their medicinal value," she noted. "From less than 5 percent of our natural resources we have derived over 55 percent of our pharmaceuticals.

And over 80 percent of antibiotics are found in nature. What's more, over 70 percent of the compounds with anti-cancerous properties are tropical."

Greeson effortlessly recited example after example of drugs discovered in nature: a new diabetes drug formulated from the saliva of the Gila monster, a fungus that suppresses the immune system and makes [organ transplants](#) possible, a plant mixture that led to the development of [anesthesia](#) drugs, an HIV-1 drug from the bark of a tree found in the Amazon rainforest.

But, regarding the HIV-1 drug, she also told a cautionary tale. "Ethnobiologists from Harvard discovered that a particular tree bark seemed to knock out the AIDS virus," she said, "but when they went down to the rainforest to get more bark, they found that the trees had all been cut down by loggers making way for development. That's a truly scary prospect, that we're losing so much land that is so biodiverse in potential remedies. That's why Healing Seekers has as its dual goals not only educating people about these indigenous therapies and healing practices, but of preserving the rainforests and similar remote areas."

Healing Seekers is in essence a six-person documentary film crew that has made expeditions to Ecuador and Madagascar, with three more planned to New Guinea, the Congo and Borneo. The fearless crew consists of producer Grace Kanoy, videographers Esteban Berrera and Kerry Kanoy (Grace's husband), sound editor Josh Jones and scientist John James. Each trek into the jungle lasts between three weeks and a month, and may cost between \$90,000 and \$120,000.

"Believe me, we're not staying in five-star hotels," she quipped. "We camp and eat granola and do everything we can to cut costs. But it's expensive, first of all, just to travel with a crew to these regions, and once you get there you have to hire guides and interpreters and get special



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transportation to get to the really isolated areas. But it's worth it if it gets us what we need to get." Once they return with the raw footage (not to mention the indigenous plants, roots, soil and flora), the post-production and editing is done by Sherri McWhorter and Diane Stevio of McWhorter Concepts, based in Greensboro.

TOP: Thomasville pharmacist Amy Greeson is the founder of Healing Seekers (photo by Rex Truell)

BOTTOM: Greeson meets with a [healer](#) in Madagascar.

"They are the ones who turn it into webisodes, podcasts, video footage and the actual documentaries," said Greeson. "Like the rest of us, they really believe in what we are doing, and it shows in their production values. They do amazing work." As proof of the quality of their work, this year Healing Seekers won a Telly Award for Best Non-profit Promotional Video. The 30-year-old organization honors the best local, regional and cable television programs and commercials, as well as the finest video and film productions and, most recently, work created for the web. This year they received over 14,000 entries from all 50 states and five continents.

"We were in a class with the Disney Channel, the Golf Channel, people like that, so this is a pretty big deal for us," Greeson enthused. "Our editors had won awards before but had never won the top prize. We're very, very proud of this." The svelte, statuesque Greeson traces part, but not all, of her transition from mainstream pharmacist to cutting-edge explorer to an externship with the US government to Alaska while at UNC. "My father was an avid whitewater kayaker, and I'd always been an outdoorsy type," she recalled. "I grew up in the woods and always loved nature. So it was a natural progression but also an awakening, part of which had its genesis in Alaska, of being able to see what was really going on. I was studying pharmacy but I began to seeing things that I'd never seen before that kind of tied it all together.

I'm amazed even now that some of my colleagues don't even realize that what they're dispensing from the pharmacy comes from nature."

As the metamorphosis was taking place, before forming Healing Seekers, Greeson ventured to Peru and Belize to learn about the healing properties of plants from the native shamans, tribal elders and medicine men. "For about seven years it seemed I was having to prove myself not only to the mainstream but also to the naturalists," said the Thomasville native, who is one of a handful of pharmacists in North Carolina who is also nationally certified in [herbal medicine](#). "They thought I was selling out because I also believed in our Western medicine. I kept saying there's a balance here of both worlds, and that's going to make the difference," adding, "Now those ideas don't seem so farfetched."

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Even though mainstream medicine has come around to at least recognizing the possibilities of natural remedies, the major [pharmaceutical companies](#) have been slow to respond. According to Greeson, "Big [Pharma](#) doesn't want to listen until you've got something tangible. We've tried to make some contacts with them but they haven't been too receptive. Our function is more educational, of raising awareness, but getting plants in a lab, while a separate entity, does go hand in hand with what we're doing."

Toward that end, Greeson revealed that two of the plants her team brought back from Madagascar have recently shown promise as potential anti-cancer drugs.

"They've only been in the lab a few months, but just last month we got the news that two of them have had hits for anti-cancer activity," she smiled. "They are being tested by Bent Creek Institute in Asheville, which collaborates with Wake Forest. We don't know how strong the hits are; it

'It would be totally unethical for me to see possible cures and not try to do something about bringing them back,' Amy Greeson mused, 'but I've learned that what we do can't be attached to any outcome. The beauty of it is the could be nothing, it could be a huge breakthrough."

She has also formed an alliance with Gordon Cragg of the [National Institutes of Health](#) and the National Cancer Institute.

"We're seeing what collaborations we can do directly with them with what we discover," she said. "That will certainly be beneficial for us, because they have so much international law expertise and the legal mechanisms already in place. And I'd like to think we can be beneficial to them with our discoveries."

Nonetheless, Greeson said that her work cannot be dependant on producing results. "It would be totally unethical for me to see possible cures and not try to do something about bringing them back," she mused, "but I've learned that what we do can't be attached to any outcome. The beauty of it is the journey itself.

"It's going to be the next generation that will follow behind us that will see the results. The most powerful thing we can do is to bring awareness to all this. That's when the walls will start tumbling down. It's wonderful to have goals and to keep moving forward, but you have to allow yourself a lot

of flexibility. What's important is that we continue to educate. When your heart is into something that's your passion there's no other choice."

Yet, as is typically the case with bold ventures done for humanitarian, rather than capitalistic, reasons, funding is always an issue. While Healing Seekers has a volunteer grant writer and has had some financial support from foundations as well as both private and corporate sponsors, that Warren Buffett/Bill Gates-esque figure has yet to emerge.

"It's funny," mused Greeson, "I was just reading an article about how disgruntled Bill Gates was with the pharmaceutical industry. He was wondering why they focus so much and spend so much time and money on erectile dysfunction and baldness instead of finding a cure for [malaria](#). So what that tells me is that we are on the right track. There are plenty of people who think the same as we do and believe in what we're doing. It will all come together one of these days." Had funding been found, Greeson's plan was to have been on an expedition in New Guinea at this moment.

"August would have been the ideal time because over 100 tribes were gathered, and a lot of interpreters would've been handy," she said. "We could have pinpointed which tribes and shamans were willing to talk and who would be willing to go with us out into the remote areas. We had the Congo planned next, so we may switch the two. A lot depends on how safe it is, though. I'm not going to take a team out and have to worry about guerrilla warfare going on around us. Luckily, we have the ability of being flexible."

Still, the pharmacist/explorer made good use of the time. She helped finish an educational webisode on their trip to Madagascar for Dr. Peter Klopfer of the Duke Lemur Center (which can be viewed on her Facebook page). Lemurs are endemic to the island and have been isolated from much of the evolutionary changes of the world.

"Duke has one of the world's premier research facilities on lemurs," she disclosed, "and we did a segment on the significant research they're doing and why it is so important to preserve these environments and species, because it's all related to the health of humans."

August also brought an invitation to make a presentation to an international scientific conference in Ecuador in January 2010. "I make talks and give presentations all the time," she smiled, "but this will be my first in front of the international scientific community. I am thrilled at the prospect, even though it's a bit daunting. These are serious scholars, well-known and published scientists, so I'd better be prepared for this one." Not to worry. If anything, Amy Greeson comes prepared. Mentally, physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. She summed up what has become her life's work thusly: "There's a Buddhist saying that goes something like, 'If you're facing in the right direction, all you have to do is keep on walking.' We're definitely facing in the right direction, so we'll just continue our walk."

To learn more about the work Healing Seekers is doing, visit [www.healingseekers.com](http://www.healingseekers.com).

Josh Jones, Amy Greeson, Grace Kanoy, Cary Kanoy, John James and Esteban Barrera (l-r) pause from their work in Madagascar.

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