Volunteerism has always been a priority for Newton physician Jennifer Scott Koontz, MD, MPH, so it wasn’t long after the devastating Jan. 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti, which killed 200,000 people, for her to find a medical relief organization that was putting together a team of physicians from Kansas.

After Kansas City-based Heart to Heart International asked if she could leave the next day, Dr. Koontz made arrangements at Pinnacle Sports Medicine & Orthopaedics to cover her appointments, then started packing clothes and camping supplies while Newton Medical Center staff bought three large suitcases and filled them with donated medications, splints, and wound supplies for her to take to Haiti.

She said good-bye to her husband and three young children and boarded a flight to Santo Domingo. She arrived in Haiti only a few days after the earthquake with no idea where her group would stay.

While she felt well-prepared in her medical training, she had no idea what to expect otherwise. “The need was just overwhelming and the infrastructure was just gone,” she said. “This was my first experience with disaster relief and obviously it was a catastrophic one.”

They found crumbled buildings, no roads or electricity, and people living in the streets because they were afraid to go into the structures that were still standing. Only one cell phone provider had service, and all banks and gas stations were closed.

By the time the group from Kansas arrived, Heart to Heart International had established a relationship with a Nazarene seminary, which had a building where they were able to stay. There was such great concern for aftershocks, however, the seminarians insisted they sleep outside under mosquito nets for several nights.

“We teamed up with a medical team from Israel in the national stadium downtown where they normally play soccer,” Dr. Koontz said. “We set up a temporary clinic with a triage line and a pharmacy, which consisted of our suitcases in the corner.”

The group got up at 5:30 a.m. every day and ate breakfast together before traveling to the temporary clinic, which was half an hour away. They’d stop work by nightfall because experienced disaster relief workers warned them about traveling after dark without any electricity.

The only light, Dr. Koontz said, came from car headlights or an occasional candle on the sidewalk with people huddled around it. “It was very surreal,” she said.

Dr. Koontz estimates her group saw 400 to 500 patients every day. The most indelible memory for her is of an elderly woman who was brought to the temporary clinic in a wheelbarrow from the hills surrounding the city several days after the earthquake.

“They had realized they needed to go to Port-au-Prince if they were going to get help,” Dr. Koontz said. The woman had a large open fracture on her ankle that was clearly infected and needed amputation. “It was really terrible but she was so thankful for us being there,” Dr. Koontz said. “She asked if it could be cleaned and covered before she was taken to the temporary hospital. She was so grateful for that.” Dr. Koontz added: “That was probably one of the most impressive things: In spite of all of the tragedy and pain, Haitians were uplifted and calm and resilient.”

The biggest help to the English-speaking physicians were Haitian medical students, who volunteered and served as interpreters.
“Most people spoke Creole and some spoke French,” Dr. Koontz said. “The medical students could speak both languages plus English. Their schools were closed, and they really wanted to contribute. They accompanied us every day.”

By the time Dr. Koontz went home 11 days later, the trauma wounds had transitioned into infections and issues arose from lack of clean food and water.

Before her experience in Haiti, Dr. Koontz’s first volunteer stint came at a local nursing home while she was a high school student in Nickerson, Kan. She always wanted to be a doctor – except for a brief time in first grade when she wanted to be a missionary – and her mother, a nurse, made a point of exposing her to the possibilities of health care.

While she was a student at KU Medical School, Dr. Koontz was founder and executive chairperson for JayDoc Free Clinic, a student-run clinic for the uninsured in Kansas City, Kan., which opened in 2003, and co-founder and student board member for JayDoc Community Clinic, a student-run clinic for the uninsured in Wichita, which opened in 2005. She continues to be a volunteer preceptor for the Jaydoc Community Clinic in Wichita.

After graduating from Bethel College in 1998 with a psychology and natural sciences degree, she spent two years as a full-time volunteer at the North Hamilton Community Health Centre in Ontario with the Mennonite Voluntary Service. While there she coordinated the breakfast program, which served 60 school children each morning, and worked as camp counselor for adults and children with HIV.

She completed the master of public health degree at KU School of Medicine and then went on to medical school. She received her MD degree in 2005 and served her residency at Via Christi Family Medicine in Wichita where she was chief resident during her last year. After earning board certification in family medicine in 2008, she completed a sports medicine fellowship at Via Christi Sports Medicine in Wichita.

As a career, she’s been able to combine her love of medicine with sports – she was captain of the varsity volleyball and basketball teams at Bethel. She earned certification in sports medicine in 2009, the same year she began practicing family medicine and sports medicine with Pinnacle Sports Medicine and Orthopaedics, in Newton and Hutchinson, as well as serving as team physician and medical director for athletic training and student health at Bethel College, which presented her with its Young Alumni Award in 2009.

She defines sports medicine as anything that helps people stay healthy and lead an active lifestyle, so it could include conditions such as a hurt shoulder to asthma, depression or chronic knee pain. She currently serves as a physician member of the Harvey County Wellness Coalition and is a facilitator for Ready, Set, Fit, a project through the American Academy of Family Physicians to present healthy fitness and nutrition ideas to 4th-grade students.

In addition, she is a faculty member for Clarion, a multidisciplinary health care class at the KU School of Medicine–Wichita and Wichita State University. She is enthusiastic about the program that “brings together students from different disciplines while they’re still at the education stage.” The students work in teams of four solving a health care dilemma or coming up with a way to prevent it in the future.

While a student, she was involved in a variety of professional activities, including serving as president of the KU Medical School chapter of the American Medical Student Association. She received the University of Kansas Deborah E. Powell, M.D., Pride in the Profession Award, the Olive Ann Beech Scholarship for Primary Care, and KU Medical Center Academic Society Awards for Student Leadership and Community Service.

She lives in Newton with her husband, Matt, also a Bethel graduate, and their three children -- Caleb, 6, Abby, 4, and Naomi, 1.