commitment to serving others is at the heart of 1952 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Albert Schweitzer’s “Reverence for Life” philosophy, which led the former theologian, musical scholar, and renowned organist to change careers, earn a medical degree at age 30, and devote the rest of his life to caring for people in need, including those at his hospital in Lambarene, Gabon, in Africa.

UVM medical students tread this same path today in many similar ways, through projects directly connected with Schweitzer’s legacy, and by following their own self-directed need to engage and help their community. Seven second-year medical students are fostering Schweitzer’s legacy through five service projects they are conducting as 2009–10 Schweitzer Fellows. One of only eleven such programs in the U.S., the New Hampshire/ Vermont Schweitzer Fellows Program annually selects a group of health professional students, students in health-related disciplines and law students who seek to help those currently underserved by the healthcare system. Each project must provide at least 200 hours of service. In one such project, second-year medical student Piyush Gupta began a daily hospital-based tutoring program called “Bedside Brainiacs” at Vermont Children’s Hospital at Fletcher Allen Health Care. Gupta’s program, focused on helping kids keep up with schoolwork while spending an extended time in the hospital, focused on creating a team of tutors to ensure that pediatric patients requiring long-term hospital stays can keep up with class assignments.

“Upon returning to school, these children are behind in their work and try to catch up to their peers, which may be difficult, since they may still not be functioning at their optimal level,” says Gupta, who partnered with Fletcher Allen’s Volunteer Services office on the program. Since this program’s launch in 2009, Gupta has involved his College of Medicine classmates as well as UVM undergrad students as volunteer tutors.

Like Piyush Gupta ’12 (above, right) who founded the Bedside Brainiac educational program for young patients, medical students constantly weave community service and improvement into their curriculum.
Second-year students Jessie Kerr and Patrick Butsch combined service and learning far from the medical campus this past summer when they traveled for three weeks through Peru. Thanks to one of seven travel awards funded by the College’s Medical Alumni Association in 2009, Kerr and Butsch first journeyed to the Caritas Felices Girls’ Home in southwest Peru, about an hour outside of Lima. The facility is the only federally-funded home for sexually abused girls in Peru. Run by two Catholic nuns and many volunteers, it is a refuge for about 45 girls aged 2 through 18. It was, of course, deeply affecting to work with the girls, Kerr explains, and though they found the experience to be emotional and sad, they were inspired by the strength and support the girls receive at the home.

Kerr and Butsch introduced the Caritas Felices girls to a morning exercise routine (though volleyball is regularly played, there was previously no structured exercise) and they brought with them more than 100 tooth fluoridation kits to use to treat the girls — an important contribution in an area where toothpaste is in short supply. The remaining kits were used when Kerr and Butsch traveled north to the Napo River area in the Amazon Basin. They worked with a Peruvian doctor in the town of Iquitos, and then ventured by boat up the Napo to study the vaccination program for tropical diseases in that area. Kerr and Butsch found the project richly rewarding, and they hope that the connections they have established, particularly with DB Lima, the charitable health care organization that facilitated their journey, can be utilized by other medical students for service/learning projects in the future.

Closer to home, with the H1N1 influenza pandemic in the news every day this fall, the nation’s airwaves and newspapers were filled with advice on how to avoid the flu (top). However, there was previously no structured exercise (middle) and not being able to afford to stay home (bottom). In addition, the study found that families with three or fewer paid sick days indicated much greater difficulty in taking children to physician visits than those who had more than three paid sick days (34.4 percent compared to 13.1 percent). “We conclude that the availability of paid sick days benefit Vermont children’s health,” the students stated in the study.

The Sick Days Coalition used the press conference and the students’ research as part of their continuing work for passage of H.382, a Vermont bill that seeks to allow working parents in the study felt compelled to present their insights publicly share their insights this group and 14 others to the College’s Public Health conference in front of Burlington’s Barnes Elementary School; (at right) Daniel Carballio ‘12 affixes a “Food Shelf Friendly” sticker at City Market; Scenese from three student community projects: Patrick Butsch ‘12 (top) gives a fluoride treatment to Peruvian girls; Joanna Conant ‘11 and Jan Carney, M.D. (above) at the Sick Days Coalition’s press conference in front of Burlington’s Barnes Elementary School; (at right) Daniel Carballio ‘12 affixes a “Food Shelf Friendly” sticker at City Market.

According to a 2009 U.S. Department of Agriculture report, more than 12 percent of Vermont households are “food insecure” — meaning they do not have consistent access to enough food on a daily basis. Helping families in need achieve food security is the aim of a community food shelf, which relies on citizens and businesses for donations to meet this objective. However, the nutritional quality of the donations is not always addressed.

In collaboration with the Burlington, Vt.-based Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf, a project led by two second-year medical students is seeking to ensure that the local food shelf not only takes in enough donations, but receives food that is truly nutritious. Nutrition as a public health issue has been the focus of student projects over the past six years. This latest group developed a poster promoting a list of “Food Shelf Friendly,” designated foods and associated stickers to be placed on shelves at several area grocery stores. “The list emphasized vegetables, fruits, and whole grains and included a variety of foods, paying attention to calories, protein, saturated fat, and sodium.”

“Our collected baseline data from seven stores about how much food is being donated normally,” explains second-year student Isaac Noyes. “Then, in early November, the poster and stickers went up at three stores, and the poster with a tear-off list of foods to donate went up at two stores.” Two stores, which serve as the study’s comparison of methods, had neither of these interventions. The team’s final results will be presented at the College’s Public Health Project Poster Session and Celebration in late January 2010, “an event that allows this group and 14 others to publicly share their insights into public health,” says Dr. Carney. “And medical students who understand public health and the community will be better physicians.”

In Schweitzer’s Footsteps

Beside Piyush Gupta’s Bedside Brainiac tutoring program, the Schweitzer Fellows 2009–10 projects at the College of Medicine include:

Helping Seniors Live Independently by Reducing Preventable Falls

Students Jane Roberts and Heather Vani are working with Burlington’s Cathedral Square Corporation and the Seniors Aging Safely at Home initiative to help preventable falls and allow seniors to continue to live independently.

Project HOPE (Health Outreach & Prevention Education)

Medical student Derek Huang aims to empower refugee community members through Project HOPE — an education-based project — by providing tools to ensure they play a lead role in their health care and live healthier lives. His work with the Community Health Center of Burlington could provide a model for use with other ethnic groups and also includes the development of health education modules.

MISSION-VT

Working with the division of public psychiatry at UVM and the Vermont Department of Mental Health, Michael McQuiggan has been conducting a project designed to facilitate the implementation of a new information system that links data about veterans’ statuses, public court records, and arrest records with agencies that provide services for this population, such as support groups and jail diversion programs. The toolkit was piloted by students at the College of Medicine and Vermont Law School in South Royalton.

Environmental Health Education and Outreach

Megan Malgeni and Alex Folk’s project was inspired in part by Albert Schweitzer’s role in medical outreach. Their goals are to integrate environmental health education into the College of Medicine curriculum, and improve environmental health outreach activities. This past summer, they created four environmental health modules on radon, clean drinking water, mold, and pandemic flu for the Vermont Department of Health to present to Town Health Officers.