On the Right Path
By Benjamin Gleisser

Providing medical treatment to thousands of displaced people living in crowded refugee camps in Thailand was an experience that touched his soul. And, perhaps, it may have even changed the world for the better.

That volunteer work in 1982 convinced Christopher Elias, BS’79, MD’83, that everyone should have access to quality health care — no matter where in the world they live.

Over the next 30 years, Elias worked for several national and international nonprofit organizations dedicated to making that personal goal a reality. And in February 2012, he joined the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as president of the foundation’s Global Development Program.

The program is committed to helping people in developing countries overcome hunger, poverty and disease by giving them agricultural and entrepreneurial skills, and providing them with access to clean water, sanitation and a variety of life-saving health tools, such as immunization.

Before joining the Gates Foundation, Elias was the president and chief executive officer of PATH, a Seattle-based nonprofit organization that works with private sector and governmental groups to increase the availability of health care to people around the world. In that position, Elias managed an annual budget of nearly $300 million and a staff of more than 1,000 employees worldwide.

Not bad for a youngster from New Jersey who, Elias says with a laugh, “had a microscope when he was a kid, an above-average-sized chemistry set and a passion for science.

“I was the first person in my family to go to college,” he continues. “I won a scholarship through Western Union, my dad’s company. My parents were hard-working people who sent their four kids to college — we all went to Creighton — because they were strong supporters of us getting a great education.”

(Following Christopher to Creighton were sisters Kathleen Elias, BSW’82; Susan Elias Diamond, BSN’84; and Maribeth Elias Christensen, BA’88.)

An aptitude for computer programming led him to meet noted Creighton scientists and medical professors Robert Heaney, BS’47, MD’51, the John A. Creighton Chair, and Robert Recker, MD’63, who needed help inputting data on osteoporosis research they were conducting. The relationship morphed into a work-study arrangement, and the teachers became Elias’ mentors, as well as good friends.

“They’re both world-class researchers who taught me how to be a successful researcher,” Elias says. “I learned different research methodologies in my classes, and they taught me how to turn that theoretical knowledge into practical applications.”

Recker, chief of the Division of Endocrinology in Creighton’s Department of Medicine and director of Creighton’s Osteoporosis Research Center, calls Elias, “one of the best students I ever had. He always had a very keen interest in global health problems, and I’m not surprised he achieved a position that’s on target with his professional goals of alleviating the big health problems of the world.”

In 1982, when Elias was a third-year medical student, he was one of six Creighton medical students who volunteered to work a two-month rotation in a refugee camp for Indochinese refugees in Thailand. The program, managed by fellow Jesuit school Georgetown University, gave students the opportunity to develop both their medical and humanitarian skills.

Far from the comforts of Omaha, Elias encountered a crowded settlement with a dearth of clean water and poor sanitation facilities. Hundreds of people living in ramshackle housing made it easy for the spread of diarrheal, respiratory and other tropical diseases. Measles and other infectious diseases, so easily preventable back home with simple vaccines, were rampant in the camp.

Reflecting back on the time, Elias says, “That was where I got my first taste of international health, and it was a life-changing experience. I saw diseases I had only read about in books and began to grasp the tight linkage between poverty and health. I became emotionally engaged, and knew that I wanted to do something that would help improve people’s lives.”

Over the next few years, he volunteered for two more stints in Thai refugee camps. Later, he became a coordinator for the American Refugee Committee in Thailand, and served with the Population Council in America and Thailand. He joined PATH in 2000, and in 2009 Creighton awarded him an honorary Doctor of Science degree. Elias’ father, Joseph, was in the audience to hear his son speak and receive the award.

“I accepted the honor five months before my father died,” Elias remembers. “Dad called it ‘the proudest day of his life,’ seeing me address the graduating class. He worked hard to put all his kids through Creighton, and it meant so much to him.”