

GUATEMALA MISSION

Mission Accomplished

By Kelly de la Rocha

The beautiful, brown-eyed baby had little blisters on her arms- the beginnings of chicken pox. Her two older sisters had rashes on their arms and complained of bloating and diarrhea. Both pigtailed heads were infested with lice. Their worried young mother had similar complaints.



As I hurried to find the anti-lice shampoo, the nurse beside me shook out anti-parasite pills from an industrial-sized jar. We offered what little help we could- a few pills for the older girls, shampoo, soap, some multi-vitamins, and Tylenol for the pain. They thanked us with beautiful smiles and made way for the next group of patients.

The line of ill and aching people snaked out of a school room in Ascension, Guatemala, population, 350. I was there as part of a volunteer outreach team, 18 strong, made up mainly of members of Good Shepherd. We arrived in Guatemala armed with 18 suitcases of donated medical supplies and over \$3,500 in contributions from Good Shepherd parishioners and other local supporters.



Our home base for the week was Mi Refugio, a private Christian school in San Pedro, 15 miles outside of Guatemala City. Close to 100 preschoolers to sixth graders from surrounding communities and from the neighborhood skirting the Guatemala City dump currently attend the school free of charge. They're provided not only with an education, but with breakfast and lunch, uniforms, medical attention, religious instruction and a chance to go on for further education. Those children are among the privileged in Guatemala, where 50% of the population attends school only until sixth grade and the other 50% doesn't ever go at all.

While some of our team remained on-site at Mi Refugio to build a chicken coop and to teach English, most days, the rest of us: two nurses, two pharmacists trained on-the-job (of which I was one), two clothing distributors and a group in charge of kids; activities boarded a school bus along with two translators and slowly bumped our way to nearby villages.

Each day we tended to families with sinus infections and rotten teeth, ruptured ear drums and horrendous skin conditions. We were witness to suspected cases of tuberculosis, hepatitis and cancer. We tearfully consoled a sad-eyed mother who had recently lost a child.



The list of problems that couldn't be fixed with the "remedies" we had so hopefully brought from the US seemed endless. And when we did have something that could take away the indigestion or the infection or the pain, along with that satisfaction came the knowledge that the carefully-portioned pills would run out way too soon, with no prospect for a refill in sight.

In this world of one-room shacks, where illness runs as rampant as the omnipresent wild dogs; where people forage through garbage to find scraps to use, sell or eat; where the smell of burning plastic and old cook fires hangs heavy in the air, you'd assume despair would be epidemic, but in its place, we found, grace flourishes.



The people we met clamored over the language barrier with their generous smiles and unwary hearts. Adults and children alike showed unfailing patience while standing for hours in line to see us. The able stuck close to the lame and infirm. The seriously ill nodded in humble acknowledgement when told that to be cured they needed to travel to a hospital they could never walk to, for treatment they couldn't possibly afford.

In the tiny village of Guamuch, after tending as best we could to 70 families, we each humbly accepted an armload of carnation, mums and roses, the flowers the villagers grow to make their meager living.

In the broiling afternoon of an endless day in the village of Cruz Blanca, a young boy entered the muddy classroom we called the medical clinic. He was followed by a swarm of flies and an indescribable stench. When he took off his too-tight, soaked, worn-out leather shoes, we saw that the bottoms of his feet, white and wrinkled from constant dampness, were covered in ulcers. The area between his toes was red, raw and crusted with dirt. "You can't wear these shoes anymore," Judi, the nurse I was working with told him, via translator. "Do you have any other shoes?" "No", he replied. "You also need to wear socks. Do you have socks?" Judi asked. "No," he replied once again.



After the illogical, American-style solutions finally left our heads, Judi and I both unlaced our shoes and took the socks off our feet without giving it a second thought. Then we took the boy outside to the dusty courtyard, sat him on a stool, and washed his feet, surrounded by curious onlookers. After the boy's feet were dried and rubbed with Desenex, Judi slipped a pair of our socks onto them and he was carried to our bus, where he sat until the last patient was seen. Then Judi took off her sneakers and put them on his feet.



It's my group's good fortune to have the opportunity to serve about 500 people during our mission trip to Guatemala. More fortunately, still, the good people of Guatemala were able to reach all 18 of us.