



Mission of Love



*"You are not here to save the world, but to touch the hands that are within your reach."
~ Kathleen Price*

Casa Guatemala Orphanage Revisited Rashid A. Abdu, M.D.

On January 5, 2010, fourteen Mission of Love volunteers drove from Ohio to Detroit Airport, on a mission to Casa Guatemala, an orphanage with 250 children, ranging in age from 3 months to 18 years. Other volunteers came from Pennsylvania, Florida, and as far as Iowa, a total of 22, including Attorney Robert Price, Kathy Prices husband. I was the only physician.

Ages of volunteers ranged from 21 years to 77, with different background, and each with special talent—carpenters, plumbers, electricians, farmers, artists, health care, and business. But Kathleen Price, the founder and director of the Mission of Love, made sure that regardless of background diversity or expertise, we all had only one mission and one goal: to serve the orphans, those beautiful children, and to show them that someone cares. Many of us were repeaters with the Mission of Love, the first timers thanked Kathy for the opportunity and hoped they would be asked again.

The 6 hour flight, with one stop at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, was uneventful, notwithstanding the usual hassle at the airports. Also, Kathy got the cheapest airfare for us with Spirit Airlines. However, if you needed a bottle of water or a cup of coffee on board, you had to pay \$2.00 for it. I was afraid to ask the price of a small bag of peanuts!

Upon arrival to Guatemala City, we went through customs without any problems. I think they know Kathy, who had been through that airport many times in the past, starting in 1992, when Mission of Love built the school at the orphanage. Since then, Kathy and Angelina Galdemez (Angie), who founded the orphanage 30 years ago, have become good friends, with common purpose—to help and care for those children. Over the years, Mission of Love has repaired torn buildings, furnished some, and last year, built a greenhouse.

Miguel, the bus owner, and his drivers, met us at the airport with two buses, and drove us to an elegant former governors mansion, converted into a hotel, next door to the American Embassy, where we spent the night. The following day, our buses rolled across mountains for about 6 hours, in a north easterly direction for



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the approximately 200 miles, to the shore of Rio Dulce (Sweet River). We took a boat to Hotel Catamaran, consisting of several small cabins, some built on posts in the water, each with its own deck facing the river. The small island was developed by an American veteran, Kevin, many years ago. He has a home on the island, but always visible, making sure that his guests were well cared for.

The following morning we took the 20 minute boat ride to Casa Guatemala orphanage. Immediately upon arrival, and within 20 minutes, volunteers were on their ladders painting. Kathy had stopped on the way out of Guatemala City, and bought 36 gallons of paint. She also arranged the purchase of building material from a local vendor for a latrine construction for the school.

The volunteer orphanage manager, Beatrice said that she had never seen volunteers come and start their work so rapidly. Since I was the only physician, I went to the clinic manned by one volunteer nurse, Alisa, a lovely and caring young lady from Vancouver. She spoke Spanish well, which made work easier. Although one of our volunteers, Elizabeth Rapalee, a 21 year old college student at Miami University, from Medina, Ohio, spoke Spanish fluently. When Alisa was out of the clinic, I had no problems seeing patients. Elizabeth and Joan Gallitto, my office assistant for many years, did a great job.

The clinic is on the water. It has one room for the nurses' quarters, one utility room, one "pharmacy room", and one examining room and one room with 2 beds for anyone who may feel sick, or tired. The reception room, with a few chairs in a row and one flat examining table, was where we saw and treated patients. Since electricity was available only 2 hours a day, there was no refrigeration. Most of the patients were children, with upper respiratory, and gastrointestinal problems. We treated intestinal parasites, lice, and scabies. Families came from villages on foot, or in little canoes. Some traveled for hours.

We saw a 9 year old village girl, who had knee injury, days earlier. Her father carried her for four hours on his back. She had fever, and her knee was red, swollen, and infected. We opened the wound for drainage, put her on antibiotics, and warm compresses. She slept on a little mattress on the floor in the girls' dormitory, with a young French volunteer as her bed side nurse. After 4 days, she was able to walk and looked well. Her father, who had walked for 4 hours from



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the village, came and took her home. I often wondered what would have happened to that little girl had we not been there.

Kathy took me, Joan, and Elizabeth, to a village nearby. I had never seen poverty of that magnitude. People don't have enough to eat. I saw an 80 year old blind woman, who looked malnourished. Like many villagers, she lived on one tortilla in the morning and one in the evening, or the equivalent in beans. I asked the family if they could give her more food. "We don't have enough to go around" said a family member. I saw at least six of the family all living in one smoke filled hut. A young lady was boiling corn on wooden fire in one corner of the hut. It brought sad memories. It was an environment not much different from my home in the village in Yemen 70 years ago.

We saw dilapidated old "outhouses" here and there, not easily accessible to the old or handicap. We came from the land of plenty, the United States of America, where we have much; now we are witnessing and touching those who have none. Perhaps to alleviate our guilt, some would reach into their pockets and give a few quetzals (Q8=\$1.00) here, and there. They will buy a little something for the moment, but the recipient will remain poor and hungry. The one common denominator that all poor and hungry people share, regardless of country, is lack of education.

I met a lovely 20 some years old lovely Mayan (she was not sure of her age), She was raised in this orphanage until age 12 when she was adopted by a lady from New York. She subsequently lived in foster homes, but managed to go to school on scholarships. Now she is a 3rd year student in a New York college. During her vacation, she returned to visit her "home", the orphanage,. I asked her about her plans after graduation, she said she would like to work in the Peace Corp. As I looked and listened to this young lady, I thought of the folks we saw a day earlier in the village. What difference an education makes!

Then I thought of the billions of dollars affluent nations give in the form of foreign aid to the leaders of underdeveloped countries. The leaders of these countries spend it for arms, for palaces, or put it in Swiss banks, and very little if any, goes to uplift the standards of the poor. If the givers could only designate a portion of this aid to go specifically for primary and secondary education, with



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stipulation that 50% of the students must be girls. This will be a giant step in breaking the cycle of poverty.

After a week, many buildings were painted, the latrine with three stalls for boys and three for girls, and its septic tanks, was completed, we said our sad goodbyes to those beautiful, happy and grateful children. On our way back home, we stopped to inspect a small "hospital" up in the mountains. Actually it was an ambulatory facility. No accommodations for inpatients. However, they had two small operating rooms where they did minor surgery. An adjacent room cramped with beds, used as a recovery room, and next to it another room crammed with cribs.

There was one operating table, three anesthesia machines, and two floor standing operating lights. Maritza, the manager, a delightful lady, showed us around and was happy to see us, because Kathy had contacted them before, and raised the possibility, that the Mission of Love would try to bring a plastic surgery team to operate on children with cleft palates. Kathy always thinks of projects to do for poor and under served children.

While still on the plane coming home, Kathy was already organizing collections for the earthquake victims in Haiti. Within a week, she shipped 4 large containers full of supplies, including water, tents, medicine, hospital beds, and a large shipment of surgical supplies and instruments, food, and construction material, etc. etc.etc. All shipments went by truck to Florida, and then by barge to Haiti. Of course, she had contact in Haiti who would meet the shipment and then distribute them to the proper hands.

Kathy said the containers could be used for permanent housing. She never stops. If not collecting, she is sorting and packing at the unheated warehouse, sometimes in below zero weather, or getting ready for another trip to some impoverished area. All those missions are filled with hope, gratitude and love.

Like the rest of the volunteers, I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this mission of true love.