

Guatemala, April 23 to May 1, 2013 Building Bridges, Susan Boone

The April Mission of Love journey to Guatemala was my first visit to that country. As I sit down to write, there are just not enough words to describe the amazing adventure with Kathy Price and Tom Nelson from MOL, Dr. Edgar Moran, director of Way-bi, and Flor and Edwin Marroquin, who are the connection to the Guatemalan people. These amazing people truly represent the heart of God to the people they serve.

It is impossible to give all the details, so I will just relate some of my observations as I followed behind Kathy, watching and learning. Our first day was spent in the hospital in Guatemala City where Dr. Moran works. We were there to assess the needs that MOL would supply for the hospital, and the wish list was long. Scrubs and sheets drying on a line outside were a visible indication of broken washers and dryers. A broken autoclave sat in the hallway, and there were no pillows for patients' beds. As the list grew, so did the smiles and hugs as old friends throughout the hospital ran into Kathy.

The second day we left the big city behind and headed for Tecpan. There I watched Kathy, Dr. Moran, Edwin and Flor build bridges. No, not with steel, nuts and bolts, but with love and intentions to connect a community. The intent was to give them pride and ownership in the new hospice and dental clinic that was being built high above the Way-bi complex by Dr. Moran and MOL. By connecting with Mayan friends who are leaders in their community, Kathy soon had the word out that volunteers were needed.

Some men came with shovels and hoes, and a teacher even brought his class for a day of community service. I called it service, but it was really hard work. The boys pushed wheelbarrows full of dirt as others dug and leveled the ground by hand, pounding it smooth for the concrete that was to be poured for the floor of one of the last rooms. They helped the crew mix the concrete by hand. The women came with brooms and baskets and cleaned the completed areas. They helped cook for the volunteers and workers, and the following days they worked in the storage area on the farm below the hill where MOL shipments and supplies were stored. The girls and women cleaned, sorted, and organized.

Through word of mouth, everyday the number of volunteers grew, and so did the smiles and community spirit. The daily luncheons at the Way-bi restaurant were a great time for the people to rest, laugh, and enjoy each other. Volunteers and some of the staff at Way-bi accompanied us throughout the week. We piled 13 people in a 7 passenger van and often had multiple vehicles, visiting families, partying at the orphanage, and going on a trek to the Ruins of Iximche` for a Mayan ceremony and community bonding. This was also a big step for the cultural bridge building between the peoples of the neighborhoods.

By the end of the week there was a visible shift in the community, and the smiles and hugs were infectious. We topped off the week with a fiesta at the farm. Our expectations were more than met when over 300 people showed up to celebrate. Children played on the trampoline, slides, and playground equipment that had been donated by MOL. They got to see all the animals at the farm and were delighted with the candy in piñatas, favors, hot dogs and chips for dinner, and then popcorn with an outdoor movie. Some of them had

never seen a movie before that night. Even the women squealed, laughed and scrambled for the candy when the piñatas were broken. Each family was given a bag of corn that the volunteers had prepared and another bag containing rice, beans, coffee, soap and other valuable commodities from MOL.

I casually mentioned the orphanage, but I have to talk about one of the highlights of the week. What beautiful children! We had games and face painting, multiple piñatas, food, and again, popcorn and a movie. We gave 13 gallon pressure cookers to the sisters for cooking, and one of the Way-bi staff fixed the stove that kept blowing up. We stopped by the orphanage again the next day to drop off other things that were on the sisters' wish list, including corn. I will never forget the gate closing behind us, and we were separated by the high chain link fence. My heart melted as one of the little boys reached his small fingers through the fence to say good bye to me.

My heart melted many times over those 8 days. A family pulled up in a truck one day and one of the men inside was paralyzed from the waist down from an accident four months before. Long story short, he didn't go to the hospital because he had no money. Kathy immediately gave him a wheel chair and adult diapers, and a call was made to Dr. Moran. 4 days later, Dr. Moran and his wife Claudia drove an hour from Guatemala City and accompanied us as we drove down a dusty, window-rattling, bumpy road, and took corn, blankets, and towels to every member of the man's extended family. We watched as Dr. Moran knelt down in the dirt yard to examine the man in his new wheel chair and talk to him. Thanks to him and MOL, the man will have a CAT scan to assess damage and possibly potential surgery to correct or preserve function.

I watched that humble doctor, a beautiful man, assess a 4 year old child with a deformed jaw. The bone did not develop, so he has no chin, and he is barely able to open his mouth. At 4 pm, Dr. Moran still had two surgeries to do that day, but he took an hour out of his busy schedule to help a child that could never pay. He carried the child, talked to the parents and social worker, and through interpreters, talked to an American doctor who will be performing surgery on the child in December. Through months of coordinated efforts between Kathy, Dr. Moran, Edwin, other doctors, and the social worker, this child has a chance for a normal face.

Other events that stand out in my mind during our trip include the privilege of being invited into the home of a dying mother and grandmother. Although Kathy had never met them, her friend asked us to go in to pray for the old lady who was dying of cancer. It was a dark, cylinder block room, with many family members standing tearfully by. They were very grateful, and it was very touching for us to be included in that circle. She died later that evening and we were invited to the funeral on Friday. We walked with some of the ladies to the graveyard and watched as the band played, which is one of the customs of the country. What a cherished opportunity to witness their culture and to be included!

My heart was touched by Walter, a blind man that Dr. Edgar hires to work and live on the farm. When we walked by one day, there he was on the children's playground equipment on his hands and knees, cleaning the slides. Walter also went with us when we visited a

blind family so that he could be an inspiration to them. When Kathy met him, he didn't even have a cane, but she supplied one for him. He is now taking computer classes.

Other things that caught my eye and heart was helping the lady volunteers fill five pound bags of corn from the 50 lb bags that MOL had supplied. Of course, corn was spilled as they scooped it out of the bags, but I watched as every kernel was hand picked off the floor and saved. Nothing is wasted there. I also watched as a little old lady volunteer finished her meal one afternoon. It was spaghetti day. She took what was left on her plate and wrapped it in a towel and put it in her basket. The same thing happened another day, and I made sure to ask her if she wanted seconds. When she said yes, other volunteers giggled when I gave her more rice and meat. I just winked at them, and we all knew that she had plenty to eat that night.

Another afternoon after lunch one of the ladies had an interpreter to tell us that she cannot see God, but she knows He is there because of what she had seen happen with Kathy that week. But we didn't need an interpreter at the fiesta when a little girl was praying before the meal. She was thanking God for everything and she finished by saying, "Thank you Senor for the gringos!" And I also say, thank you, God, for Kathy Price and the MOL, and the awesome opportunity to meet and serve the beautiful people of Guatemala. It was an honor to help build those lasting bridges of love.