

Jan 2011 Mission report

As always, never enough time. So much to tell you all. This was supposed to be a trip for planning, organization, evaluation of projects, etc. Yet it's so impossible to say no to the lines of desperate faces that await us at the clinic. As we drive in to Pueblo Nuevo each morning, it seems funny yet tragic to see 8 month pregnant ladies literally running to the clinic with osteoporotic 70 year olds behind them.

The mornings begin and their stories unfold. My heart breaks with each story and my emotions undulate between also wanting to run and wanting to be here all the time. At times, the choices that the people make seem so incomprehensible and I almost become angry when they seem delighted with the announcement that yes, you are pregnant with your 12th child and yes, you have no money or food. Randy and Ismael went to each home yesterday to get an accurate "census" of how many children there are, what grade they're in (if at all) , what age and some basic facts. He described a home with 18 people in one small room; dirt floor, filth, children with runny noses jumping on the mattress that sleeps 5 under the hammocks that sleep the rest. How can I possibly expect them to reason like we reason? Their lives are so full of tragedy that it is senseless.

Yesterday, I saw "Katerina". She's the 7 month old (weighs 10 pounds) with the heart defect. We've been working with a pediatric cardiologist in Toledo and a group in Guatemala City to have her heart problem surgically corrected. We've been buying her formula, trying to build up her nutrition in anticipation of surgery. Turns out that her mother says that she prefers water with sugar so her mom drank the formula! As rage built inside me, I reminded myself that if this was easy, everyone would be doing it.

Sometimes we read about the problems of the world – poverty, starvation, injustice. Oh, if we would just share more, things would be better. But as we become more entrenched in these people's lives, I see that the roots of despair are so deep that it will truly take an act of God to make it the world that it should be.

Yet, we see small but very significant changes. Randy and Ismael visited one home where the mom was very shy and didn't interact with the community at all. She now has one of the gardens which is flourishing and she has gained more confidence. I met with the teens in our high school program. Their faces are so full of hope. 5 of them have to leave their homes at 5AM to get to the bus which leaves at 6:30! They get back at 1:30 and then walk back home for another 90 minutes. After 2 weeks in the program, they are always punctual, clean and clearly studying. Ismael wrote out a detailed "contract" that they and their parents all signed describing clear expectations. Sr. Pam had sent math tests that we could use to assess the level that they are currently at. These students are the best of all in these 2 villages but looking at the tests, I'd say that none of them are beyond a 3rd grade level and for some, it's hard to imagine how they will get through. Yet, the expectations in the school system here are minimal which only reflects the wider issues.

Wednesday

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As we drove along the bumpy dirt road this morning, a young woman came running out of her house waving us down. Ismael pulled over and she frantically starting telling us that her daughter fell and hit a wall and "died" last night. As my heart skipped several beats, I then Irealized that she actually meant that the girl lost consciousness for a while. "Dying" is actually the term they use down here when someone faints. While my Spanish continues to improve, some of these "cultural" terms totally crack me up! The first time I heard this usage of the word "death", I had asked a woman if she had any complications with her first delivery. "Yes", she said "I died"!!! Long story but you can imagine my confusion! Anyway....getting back to the woman on the road. She explained how her daughter had fallen and was "dead" for 8 minutes. When she "woke up", she was completely confused for a long time. She vomited throughout the night and cried with a terrible headache. Now wouldn't you bring your child to the hospital if this happened?? No, not here. By the morning she was able to walk, so they sent her off to school!! But the mother was clearly alarmed and wondered if we could make a house call on our way back from the clinic tonight. So at 7PM we pulled up and they eagerly welcomed us in to evaluate the girl. This home was in a village called "Mango". Mango is a big step up from Pueblo Nuevo since they have electricity, a better school system and some minimal infrastructure. But in the home you felt the same sense of despair, filth, poverty. The girl way lying in the hammock above the dirt floor. Ten years old, she looked more like five. She shyly talked about the pain in her head but assured us that now she felt hungry and she could easily walk and talk. As we chatted, a small pig came over while a more massive one wasn't able to get in the door! Seriously, can you imagine having a pig in your exam room!!! A cursory

neurologic exam from the obstetrician showed that the girl was probably getting over a minor concussion. Now try to explain that in broken Spanish to people who have no concept of anatomy! After much grasping for words, Ismael, Orfe and I finally figured out that she had a “cuagulo” (basically a blood clot in her brain!). “Ahhh”, now it all made sense to them!

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As we drove back to the hotel, Orfe received a couple of phone calls from the local minister of health. They will be coming to meet us tomorrow as we all celebrate the new classroom that we just finished. And now the bad news.....the hopeless teacher who did almost nothing last year will be returning again. School started the first week in January and she hasn’t shown up yet. But she’s the girlfriend of the other teacher there who’s “politically” connected and so that’s that. The village families hate her and she really didn’t teach anything on the days she did show up. Randy, Ismael, Orfe and I looked at each other dumbfoundedly. Hmmm.....OK we put money into a school structure, we give books and supplies and we send people who are happy to provide guidance. But how do you make any inroad when you’re faced with this nonsense? Sometimes it seems that there are nothing but blockades. Then we remind each other of the small but very meaningful steps that we see. For the first time, the leaders really are getting together to discuss the school situation. Knowing they have us behind them, they are finally speaking up and starting to believe that they are entitled to have a voice in what happens. There is a young man in the village named Mario who seems to be an answer to prayer. He’s been at all the meetings and is one of the few who genuinely cares. Along with Ismael, he supervised the construction of the classroom all for no payment. Apparently, he’s trained as a teacher and has an official certificate. Because he’s not in the “click”, he can’t get a job and has chosen to go back for another certificate so that he can be the teacher for the adult education classes that we are sponsoring. I didn’t even know we were sponsoring them!! Ismael and Orfe never stop astounding us with their efforts. With the small salary we are giving them, they work night and day for us!!

Apparently, Orfe herself was not permitted to have an education beyond 6th grade when she was young. Her father wouldn’t allow the girls to continue beyond that level. But she always dreamed of a real education and she completed her university degree in social work this year at the age of 37. There is an organization called CONALFA that helped her succeed and so she contacted them to see if we could start one of their programs in Pueblo Nuevo. She set it up so that Mario will be paid to teach the adults to read and she will be the other teacher though she won’t be paid. She is so passionate about this work. Her energy and faith and compassion always humble me. She told me yesterday that her life completely changed when she starting working with us 2 years ago. She said that before she used to be always tired and worried. With a huge smile and tears in her eyes, she said that now she

has received the purpose in her life that she had prayed to have for years. She feels completely surrounded by God's love and care and has boundless energy. She and I laugh constantly in the back of the car as Randy and Ismael sit in the front. She is so patient with my Spanish and sometimes we come to tears laughing about the things we hear in the clinic. Gynecologists really do get to hear things the rest of the world is protected from!! When the women want to tell me something about their "private parts", they call it their "thing"!! Deena had told me this before but somehow I had forgotten so I was quite confused early in the week with all the references to "my thing"!! The other word that is so hilarious is their term for their period. Being the good little Spanish student that I am, I know at least 3 Spanish words for this. But oh no.....they call it the "infermidad".....basically the "sickness". So now when a pregnant woman comes in, I ask "Do you remember the first day of your last sickness?"

Randy had quite a day. Wait till you all see the photo of him climbing into the village water tank which is higher off the ground than I want to think about. Since he's been quite the scientist this week and has proven to the people that their water is filthy by demonstrating the bacterial colony counts on his agar plates, he wanted to show them that the water from the tank is clean. Since he was worried that the pipes were contaminated, he wanted a sample directly from the tank. How to do that? Just climb up and get it!! He is truly in his element here. If anyone is going to stamp out intestinal worms here, he is!! We continue to be frustrated that the people don't quite believe the necessity of using the latrines so it's a constant battle to convince them. On the first day, I literally saw 3 moms bring the children to the back of the clinic to poop right in front of the window!! But after Randy showed the community leaders the results of the agar plates, I started hearing new pleas from help from the moms about ways to convince some of the villagers that they had to start paying for the diesel to run the water tank. The cost is really negligible and if they'd stop paying for the injectable vitamins that some idiot brings around here every month, they 'd have the money.

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