

Trip Report

Nov 1-12, 2023

Anne Ruch

Chetti Smith

John and Mary Burchfield

Hector Garcia

Nov 1-7

Gloria Buganski

Cecilia Chaudhard

Kim Ciesla

Nov 7-12

Yadiri Lopez

Wednesday, Nov 1, 2023

Left our house at 3AM with Burchfields and Gloria. Trip started off with a little problem at the American Airlines counter where the attendant required that we fill out the Guatemala Customs paps online but they didn't know how to connect us with that. Took about an hour to figure it all out which was a bit tense. In truth, we didn't have to fill it out until we got to Guatemala City. Seemed like something that usually happens in Guatemala but you don't expect in the U.S. Everyone stayed extremely calm through the whole ordeal which told me this was going to be a wonderful group to spend the coming 12 days with and indeed, that was the case! They did a far better job at just staying calm and figuring it out than I was doing inside...I like to think I learn things on these trips. Perhaps that was the first lesson.

The TAG flight from Guatemala City was delayed over an hour so we didn't get in to Flores until after 9 and again, everyone kept such a pleasant attitude – oh, if life could always be like this!

Thursday, Nov 2

Some of the team (Gloria, Kim, Burchfields) had a tour of the hospital with Dr. Palma. From what they said, I think they were pretty moved by it all.

Kim started her teaching of Origami to the students at the school. What a huge hit!

I'm sure they will talk about that in their own reports.

I saw lots of patients for routine paps but mostly for follow-up. It was so heartening to finally be getting referrals from all over Peten and to be able to treat these people before they had an invasive cancer.

And sure enough, half-way through the day, a lovely woman of age 61 appeared with an invasive cancer. She said she had been bleeding for about 6 months and had lost about 40 pounds. She hadn't told her children but they wondered why she was losing weight. They were

heartbroken on hearing the news. I remembered back to when Flori came to our clinic and I was so shocked to see a 27 year old with this disease. Of course, I was so shocked that I brought her to the US for treatment. Somehow, now this outcome just seems like an inevitable consequence of the injustice of life when you live in poverty. Even in our own country, cervical cancer is primarily a disease of the poor, the underserved, those whom others have decided that these lives are not as valuable as others.

Sometimes I get teary but mostly I just feel angry inside and somewhat powerless against all the evil in this world. When these women come with this cancer, it is all so awful – the cancer itself is so disgusting – so foul smelling and ugly....the blood that is so hard to control. I think of the person lying on the table who seems clueless about what I am about to tell her. Do she really not know? And then of course, the almost inevitable story.....sexual abuse at age 13 or 10 or maybe even 8. Sometimes they cry and tell me that they have never told ANYONE in their lives about the abuse.....no one....not even their mothers or their husbands.....how they had suffered such shame all their lives. I try not to show that I am boiling with anger inside at the injustice of it all. And I think of how they have allowed me into this sacred space where they are sharing with me a lifetime of a terrible secret that they have had to hide. Such fear of retribution...that no one would believe them...that perhaps their husband would leave if he knew...that their mothers would choose to not believe them rather than to admit that a close neighbor or a family member (perhaps their husband) would do such a thing.

And then even more injustice...this diagnosis of cancer comes with another reality that they live in a country where resources are so scarce. To get any kind of treatment, they will have to travel 10 hours from Guatemala City where the only possible treatment exists. With what money? How will they figure out where to go? And of course I know that the radiation equipment there is often non-functioning. How many times have I seen women undergo harsh chemotherapy and then not receive the only possible cure which is radiation.

Most of these women have grown daughters, one of which is usually with them. I bring them in and we talk about it. Somehow, the patient usually remains stoic as the daughter falls apart. That is what happened on this day.

Of course, that is not always the story. Sometimes the patient is 25 years old and will leave small children without a mother. That was the story of Flori.

On this trip one evening we had a devotional where we talked about whether or why God allows evil in this world. I have thought about that for so many years. I believe He doesn't allow it. He doesn't want it for us. He loves us. It is we who choose it when we (me) see terrible evil and we sit back in silence...how many times have I done that?

And then I thank God for all the people that have enabled this work...all the donors, the volunteers, the cytotechs, the doctors, the builders, electricians, our staff....so many. And in truth, it has been a work of great joy. I think anyone involved would say it brought them great happiness doing it. Why don't we do these things all the time! I thank God that dozens if not hundreds of women have been spared this tragic outcome. And I thank God that we have a team that walks with these women on this road. Sandra connects them to a Social Worker in

Guatemala City. INCAN treats them free of charge. All the team at Propath reads the paps and slides for free....so many good people. So in the midst of all this evil, I still see God's love in so many people.

In the meantime, John worked with a team from the eye hospital "Pescatore". They came fully equipped for eye exams. They had a long line of patients all day Thursday and Friday. John was so impressed with "Mario" who was kind to the patients and explained everything in detail. I don't really know the numbers of patients that John saw throughout the week but it had to be over 100

Mary was like an angel throughout the week helping with the eye exams, checking in the patients for the paps, teaching chess or gifting the Salvation bracelets. Both John and Mary exuded this beautiful air of peace and Christian love. Nothing seemed to bother them. They were just so incredibly humble and willing to do whatever was needed.

And of course ditto that for Cecilia! She was all over the place constantly working and connecting everyone to whatever needed to be done. She never stopped....always trying to make sure that everyone had the resources to make their work meaningful....always looking for ways to take our work there and make it known to the people here. She was even the one willing to take the upper bunk bed! She is ALWAYS positive....always so kind...pretty much everything Jesus asks of us. Also, I read her trip report before sending this. It was outstanding! Thank you!!

And OF COURSE, ditto that for Gloria and Kim. It was just so fun sharing the "dorm" together. They were just so kind and always looking to better understand what we do and how we do it and how we could do it better and how we could better make our donors feel what they experienced. Kim's projects with the children were such a joy! And I was especially so grateful that Gloria came after so many years of giving SO MANY HOURS to make us who we are!!!

And there are no words to describe Chetti. She has sacrificed so much time and money to come on so many of these trips. Our cervical cancer program would really never have even started if it was not for her. As always, she worked long days to make sure that every woman received the best care. I always learn so much from her. She never complains...just always looks for ways that we can improve.

Friday, Nov 3

Some of the team went to Santa Ana Vieja where they did paps and taught Oragami.

Hector had prepared a presentation for the children about basic biology and cytology. They were incredibly interested and enthusiastic! Then Andres came and talked with them about

how he ended up becoming a cytologist and what he had to do to achieve that. It made us think about other possible people we could have to come into the school to talk to the children about other opportunities for their futures.

One 45 year old woman came for a “pap”. I saw her stumbling down the corridor with her husband (who was 22). As I looked at her, I thought “She is either drugged or something is terribly wrong”. Well, it was the latter. One of her eyes was bulging a bit and was not symmetrical with the other. She was holding her head in agony with a terrible headache. Her husband said she had suddenly lost vision about 2 months ago. They had gone to the hospital in San Benito a couple of weeks before and had just had a CT scan that morning.

I got John who was quickly able to diagnose a brain tumor. We even called my friend, Dr. Larry Spetka (the neurosurgeon) who agreed this was most likely a benign meningioma which would need surgery. He recommended putting her on a steroid until she could get treatment. They both said that without steroids immediately and treatment quickly, she could die as the tumor grew and caused a herniation of her brain stem.

I was so impressed by their ability to make this diagnosis based on a simple exam and history. So I wrote a prescription for the steroids and called Dr. Lucky who said she would help facilitate getting her into a neurosurgeon in Guatemala City.

We called her the following day and spoke to a family member. Despite all we had said, they hadn’t believed that the steroids were important so they hadn’t gotten them. Hopefully, we convinced them that they needed to get them.

2 days later, Dr. Palma was able to get us the video of the CT. She had an appt at the hospital in San Benito on Nov 8. Still waiting on follow up.

Oh...and the reason she was coming for a pap was because she had a huge tumor in her abdomen...as large as a 22 week size pregnancy....probably a benign ovarian mass but that is still to be sorted out.

Saturday, Nov 4

Lots of patients!

Another invasive cancer. 50 years old. Never had a pap. Daughter came with her.

The daughter was pregnant and asked me to ultrasound her. Story very similar to the woman above.

Group went to visit families of children in our program. (See Cecilia’s report). They told me some of what they saw....One young girl with 2 daughters – so appreciative of her girls going to our school as well as receiving the water filter and stove. She was renting the little house she lives in. She is part of the group of 6 women that work with Carmen. Her husband works long hours. She used to feel alone but now being with these other women, she realizes she is not alone and has a little hope. No one ever paid attention to her before and now she is part of a group.

Consistently the group heard how appreciative the people were to have the Chispa stoves and water filters. They reported being able to save money since they now have to pay so much less for wood and don't have to buy water.

Our group was really touched by one woman living in great poverty who was so gracious and hospitable. She invited them in and gave them bananas and tortillas. Though she had nothing, she was so upbeat and gracious....made us all talk about how we are NOT so hospitable in the US>

One woman cried as she told her story of having made a little money selling the chickens she raised. She had developed a Bell's palsy and had been able to buy the needed medication because of this money.

Sold her chickens to pay for her medical facial condition.

Pastor did a blessing and a bible reading. Everyone was crying. He built chicken coop. Very self motivated.

Another woman with a little boy seemed sad – she talked about how her house was half way done and her husband lost his job and they couldn't complete it. She wasn't really complaining ...just saying this is the way it is. One roadblock after another. She has to drop off her kids to her mother at 4AM and doesn't get home until they are asleep. This is just life when you are poor. Not a lot of hope that anything will change. They need a new roof but the interest rates are so high it's impossible (I think the rates are about 17T%)

In one house, 2 boys played a song on guitars...even in poverty, there are many happy moments. I have found over the years that this is what many of our trip members are most moved by.....that people with nothing are often more at peace and are content than those of us with so much.

In some of the houses, they saw little "SewHope projects" that the children had completed in school....a letter from a penpal from Maumee Valley school (it had a US quarter taped to it!)...a "family tree" project.

As the people in our group told me these stories, I could see their renewed enthusiasm for all the work we do. It even invigorated me so much. I think we all sometimes get bogged down by the policies and rules and administrative stuff and forget that the work we do is powerful and really is what Jesus asks of us. The time and effort we put into this really is alleviating suffering and giving people hope.

Dinner with Susan Babarczy and her daughter in Flores (see below)

We came back and had a little birthday cake for Cecilia. I thought about how kind Cecilia had been to share her birthday with us away from her family.

Sunday, Nov 5

Went to Pastor Nelson's school in Colonia Tikal. We did about 40 paps and everyone received results the same day. The three that were abnormal followed up for treatment later in the week.

John did lots of eye exams which was a special blessing for so many men, women and children. One 22 year old had no idea how near sighted she was. She was barely able to see more than a few inches away from her and no one had ever explained to her that her vision was not normal. John was able to explain her problem and refer her to the Hospital Pescatore where hopefully she will be fitted for glasses.

We did a devotional about the part in Galatians that talks about the fruits of the Spirit and how we felt so blessed to be on this trip. We were truly receiving those "fruits" We talked about why it was sometimes harder to feel that when we were at home. On these evening devotionals we talked a lot about how we felt God's presence, how we felt surprised or challenged and our thoughts about why evil exists in this world. This was definitely one of those trips that brought me closer to knowing God's will for my life and also helped me understand God more clearly

Monday Nov 6

Gloria, Kim, Burchfield, Cecilia visited Santa Ana public school. They got to see how a public school functions (or really doesn't function). Cecilia got to sit in on some of the classes at our school and see what is working well and what some of the challenges are.

The Burchfields continued teaching chess. Many of the children were so interested and we could see that this might turn into a long term interest for many of them.

Every day, some of the team went out on jornadas while Chetti and I stayed behind. Our days were VERY full! The team that went on jornadas left at 6:00 am every day and put in long fulfilling days out in the communities.

There was a moment in the afternoon when I was getting a bit weary. And then this woman walked into my room and took my hand. She put a ring on my finger and a bracelet on my wrist. She then hugged me and cried. I was so taken aback! Turned out she was the daughter of the woman we had diagnosed with cancer earlier in the week. She herself had had a precancerous lesion which had been treated and now her pap was normal. She told me that she was so thankful for all of us. It was weird how I had been feeling a little challenged just minutes before and now, here she was making me feel so loved and privileged to be working there.

Tuesday Nov 7

Me in clinic with Chetti. Day was steady.
Burchfields. – teaching chess

Mayra, Carmen, Hector, Bianay – jornada in Naranjo,

I had a long meeting with Seiner. He is frustrated with the teachers – feels their attitudes could be improved. He doesn't think they share the passion he has.... A lot of complaining about each other and not being sufficiently respectful of him and Mayra. He asked me to talk with them a bit which I did.

No water at the clinic. The pump for the city water was not working. Yadiris Lopez arrived in the evening. She is the cytotech who runs the Cytology School in Puerto Rico. What a lovely person! After a full day of travel, she arrived and we had not water! No chance for a shower...no flush toilets. She just laughed and said she was from Puerto Rico and she was used to no water or electricity! What a joy she was to work with for the rest of the week

Wednesday, Nov 8

Some of the group went to Sayaxche while Carmen, me and Chetti worked at the clinic

Thursday Nov 9

Team went to La Libertad.

Long meeting with me, Mayra, Seiner, Dr Palma and leaders from the Ministry of Education in Peten. (see below)

Friday Nov 10

Group went to San Benito

The SewHope clinic was completely packed. 50 referrals for evaluation of abnormal paps from multiple clinics and hospitals in Peten.

Meeting with Stephen from the organization "Ak" Tenamit". He talked about his 2 boarding schools which have almost 1000 children in Basico and Diversificado. One of the schools is near Puerto Barrios and one is now in the Peten. They receive some funding from Rotary but mostly they receive 80% of their funding from the Guatemalan government. He talked about his very left wing socialist viewpoints that care deeply about injustice, mercy and and poverty but said that he has to appear neutral and gets support from the politicians. He is an active Rotarian and has lived in Guatemala for 30 years. He said that funding for education from the Ministry of Education is only possible for the grades above primary school.

Chetti, Mary and John gave out salvation bracelets at the school. Extremely meaningful.

Long meeting with Mayra and Seiner about the school.

Saturday, Nov 11

Lucky and Tita came up from Guatemala City. We had our board meeting. Mayra, Carmen and Seiner attended. First, we interviewed 5 candidates for the teacher positions.

Meeting with Mayra and Seiner about school

Chess classes.

Summary of Projects

Education – MULTIPLE with meetings with Mayra, Seiner, teachers

Issues

1. Seiner is not really happy with any of the teachers. He would prefer to get rid of them all, but especially Rossi and Sophia. He cites lack of respect, lack of enthusiasm, poor attitude toward the mission. Sophia is particularly apathetic and runs her class poorly. Wendy is extremely disorderly and her class is “dirty”. We interviewed 5 teachers and they are going to interview more. 2 of the 5 appeared fairly well educated, strong job backgrounds (though not much in teaching) and very professional. Mayra and Seiner didn’t seem to care too much if they had worked as teachers much because they thought that working in the public school system is actually a disadvantage in terms of experience
2. Discussion about extending school day from 7-2 or 7-3. They feel that with giving lunch and providing a play time, there is not much time left for teaching everything especially “extras” like science, social studies, music
3. They feel it would be best to have Seiner just work as the principal and not teach a class. Right now, he is having to do a lot in the evenings and weekends and he has no time to monitor the teachers when they are teaching. There are more and more requirements from the MOH and he doesn’t feel he has the time to get everything done.
4. They want to continue the reinforcement program but it is primarily the students working on the computers and they think it could somehow be incorporated into the regular school day and perhaps extended after the primary school ends.
5. What to do about adding additional space for additional grades. For this year, they can combine kindergarten and 1st grade into one class but going forward we might have to add classrooms. They have ideas for classrooms which could be much simpler and cheaper but of course that brings up a lot of issues. For this year we are fine and can explore other options in the coming months. Also, before we put in a playground, we would have to decide where everything would be located
6. We had a meeting with Susan Babarczy who is the founder (with her husband) of the Corazones En Accion Jungle School. We heard about the struggles that she and her husband had financially with the “Jungle School” they had started. After 20 years, they had to close it this week. I had visited there a couple of times and had been so incredibly impressed by it. It scared me a bit to hear they couldn’t continue it. But then I thought

that even if it closed, it had served many children for many years and who knows what good things will come of that. They may be able to sell us supplies and equipment from their school

7. Met with representatives from the Ministry of Education. They were so impressed with our school and all that we are doing. They are well aware of the challenges that the public school system faces. They promised to give us the competency exams that the government has for all grades that are available for the students to take at the beginning, midway through the year and at the end of the year. They said we can put 2 grades in one classroom if needed. Also said we can extend the hours of the school if we want to.
8. Everyone was incredibly excited about the teaching of chess and they may start a “Chess Club” in the coming year. They also really liked having people come in to talk about their occupations and would like to do more of that.
9. We talked about having Andres be more involved with the teaching also. He is finishing his masters in environmental issues and would love to teach.
10. Talked about more ways students could be involved in hortilizas

Cervical Cancer Prevention

We did 704 paps and biopsies

472 conventional paps

99 thin preps

41 colposcopies

33 “LEEPS”

LGSIL 8

ASCUS 53

HGSIL 11

CIS 1

Invasive cancer 3

This was probably our best trip ever for our cancer prevention program. We are now getting all kinds of referrals from all over Peten. We are also getting paps from multiple clinics that we read. There are of course issues that have to be improved (eg. Are we sure abnormals are getting followed up when they are not done by us?, quality of paps needs to be improved somewhat although it is generally MUCH better)

We got news that Hector got the \$10,000 grant from the ASCCP. We had thought that the grant was for our school/lab but the majority of the funding is for 3 cytotechs to go to Guatemala in 2024. Not clear how the grant will be processed. Working with Hector on this.

Making progress on getting the lab set up. Lots of talks with Yadiri Lopez about how she can help us. She is the head of the Cytology school at University of Puerto Rico. Probably need to

get an affiliation with a med school (there is one now in the Peten) and we might want to connect it with a university here.

Public Health Projects

They are currently doing a community survey of these families to find out what is best way to invest our money to help them. Consider current projects as well as possibly, beds, floors, latrines, solar lights and others.

Fish – turns out that Elder had kind of alienated MAGA. Carmen has reestablished a great relationship with them and so they are giving us fish again as well as lots of good advice (eg how to improve the oxygenation system, how to protect the tanks when there are major rain storms). Overall, they feel the fish program is excellent providing money and nutrition to the families.

Money savings program for women - There are now 6 women who work together to save money. They are coming up with many ideas of how to do this. At minimum, they save Q25 each every week. Money is in a box kept at one woman's home and key is at another's. They gave many wonderful examples of how this is improving their lives.

Stoves and water filters – They really want to expand this program. Want to know how much money we can supply so they can figure out how many they can install. Families love them and cite the benefits. Water filters need to be replaced every 2 years

Sunflowers – kids made Q300 from them. They want to expand this program. Want to start hortilizas for a wide variety of products that are very nutritious and families may not be familiar with.

Want to continue the “VIVERO” with the children.

Problems with the plumbing – a never ending issue! The city currently has a broken pump and there is no city water being distributed. WE are paying for water to be brought to the clinic.

Guards are doing a great job helping with chopping, fish, other maintenance issues

Chicken projects – tremendous. Will start back up in January. One family has had such success with it that they no longer need us.

Annual Meeting

Carmen and Seiner and Mayra attended. This was where we talked about much of the above. Employed staff can be part of our Board and Lucky says she would encourage that.

We will talk about this at January meeting. NO meeting in December. In January, Carmen will do a big presentation about the public health projects.