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MEMBERS GIVING BACK



The 20 Year Journey: Medical Missions to Honduras

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On October 29, 1998, Hurricane Mitch struck Honduras, a Category 5 in intensity. Its effects were devastating, with at least 11,000 mortalities and leaving 1.5 million people homeless, about 20% of the country's population. The 2nd worst Atlantic hurricane in history. Due to the heavy damage, the World Meteorological Association retired the name Mitch from the Atlantic hurricane naming list.

I, like most Americans, experienced this tragedy via CNN reporting, with the satellite images of its grey swirl as it headed to Central America and the subsequent videos of the human tragedy.

I never realized this event would change my life.

In December 1998, three months' post hurricane, I was approached by members of All Saints Church in Beverly Hills about the possibility of leading a small team of four volunteers from their church to go to Honduras to assess the situation. The church already had a relationship with an Episcopal church in Puerto Cortes, an industrial seaport of 200,000 residents on the Caribbean coast. All Saints was hoping to perhaps develop a medical outreach to needy communities impacted by Mitch.

As a pediatrician in private practice in Santa Monica I felt somewhat ill prepared for the challenge. Although, my medical school training included a brief second year elective in public health, and I had spent a few years' post residency at a public health clinic in East Los Angeles, but Honduras? My Spanish language skills were proficient, but parasitic disease, cholera, et. al? It sounded daunting, but intriguing. Somehow, I just felt the need to go.

Upon our arrival in Puerto Cortes, 3 months' post Hurricane, the city was in ruins, with spotty electricity, rivulets of water and mud still meandering through the streets and structures in disrepair. The pastor, who was our contact person and guide, toured us through the city, which included surveying the homeless shelters that were set up in school gymnasiums. We spent one day hiking into the jungle to see Barba Chelles, a village of a few hundred that had been isolated from access to medical care.



Waiting at the village of Barba Chelles

Well, you didn't need to be an epidemiologist to know the medical needs were significant.

Thus, began what is now a near 20 year, annual medical mission to Honduras. With the ongoing help of the parish at All Saints Church, our team has grown to about 20 volunteers, including two pediatricians and internists, an optometrist, nurses, pharmacy staff, and translators. We organize and inventory about 2000 lbs. of medicines, including vitamins, anti-parasitics, antibiotics, antihypertensives and antidiabetics and visit the same four rural villages yearly. We convert their rudimentary, but lovely, churches or schoolrooms into medical clinics and provide care to about 1200 children and adults during our one week mission.

I must say, this 20-year journey has provided me the perfect complement to the medical work and the "business" of navigating through the challenges of my Santa Monica practice.

Donations may be sent to All Saints Church, 504 North Camden Drive, Beverly Hills, California, 90210 - Attn: Debbie Gauer



One of the villages queuing to be examined