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Clare grad works to make Guatemala better

The city of La Antigua in Guatemala is a popular destination for many travelers. It bustles with open markets, historic architecture, and breathtaking scenery. Not far beyond Antigua, however, is a Guatemala few tourists ever see.

Lois (Dunn) Werner graduated from Clare High School in 1968. She and her husband Ken founded People for Guatemala in 2010 after realizing the dire needs of the people. "We couldn't ignore the poverty we saw when we visited the region," said Ken.

The Werners have been full-time residents of Guatemala for the past 5 years and volunteer their time to the organization, doing everything from bookkeeping to building houses. "I didn't take Spanish in high school which now I regret" said Lois who admittedly struggles with the language. "But I don't let it become a barrier. Pictures and gestures work but sometimes things do get lost in translation".

Adjusting to life in a third world country wasn't easy at first because everything was different. Food was a challenge, making a deposit at a bank took 2 hours, and learning the roads without directional signs took a few trips. But after 5 years the couple agrees "It's much easier now that we know what to expect. We don't get frustrated anymore".

They do enjoy getting back to the U.S. though. The couple returns to Clare a couple times a year to see family and friends. The Dunn's have lived in Clare since 1954.

Guatemala has the highest poverty rate in Latin America and the worst poverty is in rural areas that are home to native Mayas. Most families get by with less than \$3 a day and over half of the children suffer from malnutrition. Most Mayans living in rural villages have not attended school past the 6th grade. "Basically they suffer from food shortage, no access to health care, lack of education, improper sanitation, no running water and most cannot find steady work" said Lois Werner, President of People for Guatemala, a nonprofit organization that helps poverty-stricken people in Guatemala get access to basic necessities and improve their quality of life.

The organization's primary focus is on improving health and access to education in rural Mayan communities in the municipality of San Martin, Jilotepeque, about 45 minutes from La Antigua.

Hundreds of men, women, and children suffer from preventable and treatable health conditions, going undiagnosed and untreated due to the lack of health clinics, medicine, and doctors. The nearest hospital is 2 hours away by bus, and transportation is expensive and out of reach for most rural inhabitants. The few health posts in rural areas, run by the national government, are equally difficult to access for the majority of people. Even if they do manage to get to a clinic, facilities are chronically understaffed and rarely even have medicines to treat patients.

Responding to the widespread lack of medical care in Guatemala, People for Guatemala and their counterpart in-country organization are revving up their commitment to provide access to health care and services for indigenous Mayans. The goal is to make affordable health care available to all men, women and children. "We have a capable and compassionate Guatemalan doctor who is dedicated to serving the poor," said Lois. In addition, four well-trained auxiliary nurses work beside the doctor at every clinic.

Because buses don't run every day from many rural villages, people cannot travel to receive medical care so the medical team travels to six villages every month and sets up a mobile clinic treating sometimes in excess of 75 patients a day. Often people are too sick to come to the clinic so the medical team walks to the patient's hut to attend to the patient.

Their efforts are already having an impact. The number of patients treated at People for Guatemala's rural health clinics is increasing every month. Four years ago, only 1,200 patients visited the clinics. Today, over 300 patients are treated every month for everything from acute illnesses, like upper respiratory infections, to chronic diseases, like diabetes and hypertension.

In addition, to providing direct medical care, clinic staff takes the time to educate patients on how to live healthier lifestyles. Patients are taught about the importance of clean drinking water, sanitation, vaccinations, family planning, and disease prevention. While each patient is asked to pay Q5, the equivalent of 60 cents, for their care and medications, no one is turned away.

Despite the number of patients People for Guatemala has helped so far, the need in the country remains great. "Our nonprofit needs to expand the delivery of health care by increasing the number of clinics we operate, and the services we provide, so we can reach more people across the region," said Lois. "It's difficult to see children suffer from common childhood illnesses like tonsillitis or ear infections and have to wait three weeks to be seen by a doctor."

In order to help more people get access to basic medical care, People for Guatemala is actively raising donations around the country. The nonprofit relies on donations to keep the clinics running.

Costs in Guatemala are relatively low — \$7.90 is all it costs to treat a patient, including the exam and any medications. Their staff Medical Doctor earns only \$64.50 a day — considerably less than most U.S. doctors make in an hour. Unlike some nonprofits, 100% of donations go directly to the people they serve.

“I know money is tight for a lot of people right now,” said Lois from the one-room People for Guatemala office, located in the Werner’s home on the outskirts of Antigua, Guatemala. “But here is a real case of a little bit making a huge difference for someone. Only \$8 means a child won’t have to suffer for weeks or months with an easily treatable illness. It just breaks your heart to see that when it would take so little to ease their pain.”

In addition to the 7 rural health clinics a month, they install vented, efficient stoves, build schools and water projects, improve houses and build composting latrines, help junior high and high school students with scholarships, and provide classroom support in 14 rural schools. The organization partners with the local people to teach them how to realize their own capacity to make changes in their families and in their communities. The organization occasionally hosts small groups of volunteers to do construction projects.

To learn more about the difference People for Guatemala is making, or to make a donation visit www.peopleforguatemala.org. Contact Lois at 941 244 8692

Published July 26, 2013