

What Was I Thinking?

A reflection of my trip to Guatemala

By Gene Jeansonne

As I sit here pondering the events of the last week, a smile comes across my face and I think...what an adventure! It all started when my daughter, the nurse, told me, "I'm going to Guatemala...where is it"? So I "Googled" a map and without thinking said, "That sounds exciting. I would like to do that but **not** with any medical team". I have a systemic aversion to blood and guts. Building and fixing stuff is my thing. I thought no more about it other than how proud I was of her for giving of her time and money to help someone else. Was this **my** daughter? And I went on with my self-centered life. The next day I received a phone call. "Dad you can go" she says. You have been asked to go because there is lots of stuff to fix. Now here is my dilemma. I never volunteer for anything, but...the thought of Judgment Day and a voice in my head said, "I asked you to do something for me and you said...NO." I stammered, "OK...when do we leave." Now my concerns mount. I don't speak the language. What will I fix? What tools do I need? What parts will be available? Will I get sick? And, who are these strangers I'm going with?

Packing

Not wanting to take my expensive name brand tools I opted to purchase new ones from my favorite disposable tool store, "Puerto Flete" (Harbor Freight). Amazingly, everything I needed was "on sale". That had to be a sign. Stopping at Goodwill I bought twenty five pounds of children's clothes to bring me up to the maximum weight limit. Throwing in three of my best old work shirts, a tooth brush, a never-been-used "Diccionario" I latched my bag. I struggle to lift another huge duffle bag of some kind of medical supplies, dust off my passport and I'm off.

The Ride

A two and half hour plane ride later we touch down in Guatemala City. Then after a test of our patience we board the bus to Patzun, approximately 45 miles west. This takes two hours even with a bus driver who's obviously in training for the "Indy 500". Walt Disney could not have come up with a ride to equal this one. With both hands grasping the seat in front and heart in throat, I catch glimpses of the beautiful mountain countryside patchworked with hand cultivated fields of corn, broccoli and other vegetables nestled in every available spot with less than a 45 degree slope.

Arrival

Arriving at the orphanage/clinic we encounter a small crowd of people patiently waiting for surgery which is scheduled for the following day. Dressed in a brown habit, the nun in charge, Madre Reyna, welcomes us with a warm greeting and a smile that does not need to be translated into English.

Setting Up

We immediately unpack the medical gear and start setting up. Before I can even ask what needs to be fixed I am summoned to the O.R. to rig up a Lap-chole???? camera and monitor. Fortunately I have “duct tape”---the universal repair/assembly tool of choice. After securing the monitor with a generous amount of D.T., I hook up the lines for the oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide and check for leaks. This is followed by a plethora of other small seemingly “no-brainer” jobs.

Our Quarters

I can say with a certain degree of confidence that Frank Lloyd Wright was not the architect on this project. The rooms are unheated. The walls, ceiling and floor are not insulated. The inside temperature was exactly the same as the outside: highs 70, lows 49 degrees F. The shower is reported to not have hot water. Hot showers are at the top of the nurses’ list of items to be fixed. The shower has only one unmarked valve which delivers cold water, very cold water. But there is a small “on demand” gas water heater across the room that is plumbed to nowhere. After unlocking the secret of lighting the pilot, I simply connect a garden hose to the heater and duct tape the other end of the hose to the existing cold water shower head. The news of hot showers excited the entire team.

The Next Day

Inspect hospital beds and determine problems. The drive coupling between the electric motor and the jack screw that raises and lowers the bed is broken beyond repair. Madra Reyna, a “git-er done” kinda woman, takes my drawing of the part and my explanation (in sort of a pig-Latin Spanish) and indicates she knows who to call in Guatemala City. If they have it...my favorite driver will be going to town at noon and I can ride with him. To my surprise she locates the part. Uncertain of the cost she gives me 1500 Quetzals with instructions “we speak later” I know what that means; no bar hopping with the change. I have no idea how much Q1500 is. It seems like monopoly money. Off I go with a stern warning from the nurses “do not eat anything along the way”. Oh Good! We are not going in the “big” bus that all 14 of us came in, it is a little Mitsubishi van probably designed to hold 7 passengers...that makes good sense. As we leave I notice this is not way we came. We go to the other side of Patzun, stop at a typical walled-in-building with locked gate. Polo, the driver, gets down and knocks on the big steel doors and out comes an attractive woman dressed in traditional village garb and a smile that would warm the coldest heart. She says something and motions us to come in. She ushers us into the kitchen, sits us down and serves us a bowl of soup, something wrapped in a leaf and a Pepsi. My soup contained the only piece of meat I can see. Clearly I am being given preferential treatment. With the warning “do not eat anything” fresh on my mind, I think, there is no way I am going to refuse this kind of hostility regardless of the consequences. Lunch finished, I notice lots of people all dressed in their Sunday best. How thoughtful of them to see us off. Wait a minute, they are all getting in the van and as the 18th person climbs in, the little van squats on its axles. Then, Polo and I squeeze in. No need for seat belts or holding on this time. After a two hour ride back to Guatemala City, we drop off the passengers and proceed to zig-zag across the city hopefully toward our destination. I struggle to maintain some sense of direction, strain to find street signs

or any markings to help keep my bearings. It is then I notice we are at the corner of “Una Via” and “Una Via”. As a matter of fact every street is named “Una Via”. That is when I knew we had to be lost. Fortunately the traffic was only going “one way” and before long we arrived at a gated and locked entrance. Polo has to announce our arrival and an attendant finally comes to let us in. We climb the stairs and enter an office like you would see in an old black and white movie. It’s staffed by one lone girl to whom I desperately try to explain what I need with seemingly little success. After a frustrating few minutes she hands me a bag which has been sitting on her desk throughout the entire episode. In it is exactly what I need. At least she is polite enough not to laugh out loud. Actually she is apologetic as she hands me the bill. 693.00 Quetzals for the two little plastic parts. Unshaken by the amount, I pay the bill with the “monopoly money” I was entrusted with and we depart. It’s only later I learn the correct exchange rate and determine that I have spent about 100 dollars for a couple of plastic parts. Wow! Hospital beds are kinda like airplanes when it comes to repair parts. We returned to pick up our passengers, and after a lengthy delay we all started back to Patzun. Now I feel as if I have experienced how real Guatemalans travel.

The 3rd day

Now the beds I need to work on all have recovering patients in them ...so I turn my attention to the TV in the children’s dining room mounted high on a bracket along with the VCR and DVD player. After some sign language...actually it’s more like that game where it’s a book, a movie, or what ever...the children all shout “escalera” and a ladder appears. Climbing up I connect all the wiring for the peripheral equipment to the tube and pop in a Spanish copy of “ANTZ”. A cheer rises from the crowd in the room as all eyes stare at the screen. The little faces shine with delight...it’s an image words can’t describe and a feeling that warms me to the core.

The next project is installing a new antenna. We start by searching for a mast, cannibalizing a rusty leg from an old swing set and attaching the new “mast” to the old one. It’s sort of a Huck Finn/Rube Goldberg arrangement of wire, duck tape and swing set parts, perhaps more abstract art than engineering. Truly, necessity is the mother of invention. After some trying moments, I am able to cobble together one contiguous piece of coaxial cable...attach one end to the TV and the other end to the abstract art. Now for the moment of truth. Power on, remote in hand but still no signal available from the antenna. What could be wrong? I push every button on the TV and the remote; I exhaust every ounce of my engineering knowledge and all my years of technical experience with no success. Just then Dr. Juan appears, presses one button on the remote and instantaneously the screen comes to life. In my amazement I blurt out, “How did you do that?” “I’m a doctor”, says he. These things require a superior mind, he inferred. “Yeah! a doctor or a nine year old” I retort. And in his characteristic good humor replies, “There’s not much difference between a doctor and a nine year old”. Touché! When you are right you are right.

And so it goes; there are just too many sights, experiences and impressions to put on paper.

All the children were clean and dressed in serviceable clothes. Their admiring little faces had such happy smiles. They played with simple toys; kites (a bit of string tied to a plastic bag) sticks and old leaves. They used their imagination. Something I fear may be lost to a generation of kids who grow up with video games that leave nothing to the imagination.

The Guatemalan people are naturally beautiful, unmarked by tattoos and body piercings. There was an obvious absence of obese people and their faces showed character...probably from years of working in the fields.

The sight of a woman in traditional dress, a bundle of fire wood balanced on her head, walking along the roadside talking on a cell phone brought the realization that there was a strange mix of the old and the new.

Alas! It's was time to go home. I put on my ruby red slippers, clicked my heels together three times and said, "There's no place like home, there's no place like home, there's..."

The strangers I went with and the friends I came home with:

Dr. Vincente Juan (Corpus Christi)

Dr. Peter Rojas (Victoria)

Alba Taft (Washington State)

Teresa Moreno(Corpus Christi)

Nadia Vargas(Corpus Christi)

Eve Duhart (Victoria)

Linda Consuelo(Corpus Christi)

Jamie Jeansonne (Victoria)

Sandy Ruddick (Port Lavaca)

Norma Martinez (Corpus Christi)

Corina Flores (Corpus Christi)

Ruby Rodriguez (Corpus Christi)

Home again where the streets are sooo.... wide, traffic goes both ways, and all the streets have their own name.

Thank you Lord Jesus, for blessing me so, and for letting me live in a county where I have no fear of drinking from the garden hose.

By gene jeansonne

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