

NEWSLETTER

VOCES Y MANOS POR EL DERECHO DE LA SALUD

Introducing a New School of Nursing in Rabinal- and Voces y Manos Partnership!

by Michael Bakal

Medical chart in hand, an elderly farmer from the community of Nimacabaj, Rabinal, emerges from the health fair waiting room. He scans the premises with a faint look of uncertainty. Perhaps he is unsure of where to receive the medical attention he was promised, or perhaps he distrusts a project organized by outsiders. Momentarily, a nursing student approaches and greets him warmly in his native language of Maya-Achi: "Utzilaj Anim", good morning. Instantly, the farmer's misgivings are allayed. The young nursing student takes the elderly gentleman by the arm and guides him to the doctor, where she serves as a translator throughout his medical checkup.

Unfortunately, the care and compassion demonstrated by this nursing student - one of our collaborators in the health fairs of 2009 - is the exception rather than the norm in Rabinal. Cases of discrimination against Rabinal's Indigenous majority have been documented in academic journals, but the following anecdote tells it best:



Guillermo Chen Morales, Director of our partner organization Fundación Nueva Esperanza, was watching a group of students play soccer when one of the boys fell and badly injured his leg. When Guillermo rushed the boy to the local health center, he expected to receive immediate medical attention, but was shocked to hear the medical staff chastising the boy's dirty clothing and indigenous way of life.

Outraged by the humiliating and discriminatory treatment he witnessed, Guillermo set out to change the health system in Rabinal. The solution to Guillermo and his co-workers was clear: health professionals needed to come from Indigenous communities. They needed to speak the local language and be intimately familiar with local culture. In 2009, that vision became a reality with the opening of Rabinal's first and only school of nursing.

We were fortunate that this dedicated group of nursing students was available and willing to collaborate with Voces y Manos' volunteers to organize the 2009 health fairs. At our weekly meetings I was increasingly humbled by the camaraderie and sense of purpose that united this group and my admiration for them grew as our partnership developed. The students, mostly women in their early 20s to 30s, spoke frankly about the sacrifices in their line of work: giving up weekends, staying late at the clinic, and often making due with woefully inadequate resources.

Yet despite these challenges, they recognized a calling to attend to the needs of their patients.

Our weekly planning meetings, which brought together the 5 Voces y Manos volunteers and the 15 nursing students, were a highlight of the program. Each meeting typically began with a fun song or game, followed by the business of preparing the health fairs. Together we set goals, collected needed materials, conducted community interviews, and planned every minute detail of the health fairs.

The trust we established in these planning meetings laid the foundation for the quality care provided at the health fairs. In patients' post-fair interviews, it was almost universally reported that the nursing students, who acted as translators, guides and auxiliary nurses, helped create an ambiance of trust, organization and respect. They helped ensure patients at the health fairs were treated as all human beings should be: with dignity.

In Rabinal, where international intervention has more often been exploitative than beneficent, long-standing issues of access to health care are best met by the local people. It is our great privilege to work alongside Fundación Nueva Esperanza and their remarkable nursing students as they address these issues one patient at a time.



The Med Student's Day at a Village Clinic



by Liz Berryman



Today was a rude awakening for my young naïve aspiring-to-be-a-doctor self. I've been beautifully blessed to have good examples of compassionate doctoring in medical school and more specifically through my involvement in UC-San Diego's free medical clinic. I ran into some of the realities of how health care functions in impoverished settings when I travelled with a team of doctors to one of Rabinal's villages for their monthly medical visit.

Healthcare is provided for the Indigenous people who live here in the aldeas (villages) of Rabinal by two Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Each aldea receives a monthly visit from a doctor and their health education team. If health complications arise between these monthly visits, patients must wait out their sicknesses or travel to the Centro de Salud (a 3-4 hour walk to reach Rabinal before the Centro opens at 8am, only to wait longer still for a doctor).

The NGO health workers and I arrived in Las Ventanas after an hour long drive from Rabinal.

Outside the cinderblock clinic at the top of a ridge sat 50ish Mayan women in their brightly colored skirts and huipils, their babies slung on their backs and their other children toddling around. And boy, was I excited to return to clinic.

But I didn't expect that the first thing the doctor and I would encounter

when we entered the door was the community midwife lamenting the loss of an infant during childbirth on Sunday. I didn't expect the doctor to sit down and talk to the family about the baby's death without ever offering even a word of solace. I didn't expect her to immediately scold the family for not making it to all of their prenatal checkups. The father said that the reason they didn't call the community's emergency committee for a ride to the hospital when things started going wrong with the delivery was that they couldn't afford to pay for the ride. Least of all, I didn't expect for the doctor to only ask for the names of the family members so that she could write them on the official report finding the family at fault for their baby's death. Hour One.

Then the physician's official consultations began and I was able to do many things for the first time. I performed an abdominal exam on a pregnant woman and felt the positioning of her baby, I made my first child cry in a doctor's office, and I heard my first cases of pneumonic lungs. I also saw my first (through eighth) cases of child malnutrition. And it was most interesting what the doctor did in these interactions.

"Escucha, [Listen]," she'd say overtly to me.

"¿Cuántos años tiene usted? [How old are you?]" She would direct to the patient.

"Viente. [20]."

"¿Y cuántos hijos tiene? [And how many children do you have?]"

"Tres."

And each time I would get the same gaze, a gaze which made the mother look down in shame, a gaze which preceded another round of scolding about how the mother should be feeding her baby better. Often this was followed by the doctor attempting to cajole the mother into birth control because "You can't bring another baby

into this world that you can't feed." At this point, the patient's conservative beliefs, cultural background, and the machismo restrictions of her husband would lead her to refuse the advice, and lead both women to end the consultation, shaking their heads in disbelief.

As the day wore on I grew more and more disenchanted and incised with the doctor and her attitude toward the patients she was supposed to be serving with compassion and care. Why and how can a doctor treat their patients like this? Compassion fatigue? The frustration of having the supply of only 10 different drugs in your medicine cabinet make your efforts feel pointless? Are the days just too long when your 44th patient of the day at 3pm is another malnourished infant? Is there ever a point where personally blaming someone for the consequences of their poverty is an acceptable practice? My day left me with even more questions.

I pray that the path that I enter as a doctor will never lead me here. And I wonder as I sit on my thin wire bed in my dirt-floored room, if maybe this is the space I've been looking for, the medical niche where I fit, living in rural Guatemala.

ABOUT LIZ BERRYMAN



Liz is in her 2nd year of medical school at UC San Diego. She works as a clinic manager for one of the UCSD Med School's Student Run Free Clinics.

"Voces y Manos was a vehicle to experiences that changed the way I view the world... In the midst of this new level of global consciousness, working with Voces y Manos for the health of indigenous Guatemalans today and the community leaders of the future was a precious experience that I will carry with me into my practice as a physician."

ABOUT VOCES Y MANOS...

Voces y Manos was started in 2007 after UC San Diego graduate Michael Bakal returned from a summer of volunteer work in Rabinal. After hearing stories of the wonderful people in Rabinal and their lack of access to health care, Michael's friends and former UC San Diego students Jessica Nicholas, Amy Yam and

Michael McGuirk decided to put their values into action by starting a student organization. Now in its third year of operation, Voces y Manos operates under the fiscal sponsorship of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and has provided medical care for over 1,500 patients and scholarships for 12 students.

A Look at the Summer 2009 Program

by Josh Hoerger

In the Summer of 2009, Voces y Manos returned to Rabinal, Guatemala to continue building upon the projects of the previous two summers. Our group consisted of five volunteers, Liz Berryman, Peter Hargreaves, Josh Hoerger, David Bakal and Michael Bakal, and we traveled to Guatemala with the goals of organizing two community health fairs, coordinating independent projects with local youth, and solidifying our scholarship program.

However, this summer differed from the previous two right off the bat because for the first time, instead of staying with an NGO, we were living with Rabinal families in their homes! This was new for volunteers and hosts alike, but after only one summer it's almost impossible to imagine doing things any other way. The close relationships we formed with our host-families during the two months in Guatemala made this experience incredibly fulfilling and added so much in the way of simple familial pleasure to the trip. However, we didn't have too much time to spend with our host-families because there was work to do!

The organization and execution of two health fairs in the remote communities of El Sauce and Nimacabaj was a thoroughly collaborative effort between Voces Y Manos, a group of Guatemalan NGOs and the students of a newly-opened nursing school in Rabinal (See page 1). The addition of the local nursing students to this year's health fairs helped ensure that the fairs were superbly tailored both medically and culturally to the rural, indigenous people around Rabinal, who are desperately underserved in terms of



* Pete playing the guitar for part of the youth's skit during the health fairs



UCSD Medical student Liz Berryman giving directions to the nursing school student volunteers before the El Sauce Health Fair

health care. Each fair took a full day, beginning before sunrise and lasting till the waning light of the evening. To volunteer in the health fairs was undeniably tiring--but as Peter Hargreaves said, "It was a good tired, the kind you feel after a hard days work." However, the true mark lay not with how we felt but rather what was accomplished, and ultimately the health fairs were a spectacular success: We provided checkups from a general physician, a dentist, a nutritionist and a wide array of medical tests and medications to over 600 people.

However, the area where Voces y Manos had the greatest impact this summer was in our youth scholarship program. From the beginning of the summer, we met several times per week with a group of 11 highly motivated students from our partner organization Fundación Nueva Esperanza's bilingual middle school. In these sessions, we engaged the youth in a variety of team building, critical thinking, and leadership development activities to help them identify needs

and assets in their home communities. The youth—who were increasingly coming to identify as true community leaders-- applied all that they had learned to successfully develop projects aimed at meeting one of their community's most pressing needs. By the end of the summer, projects were underway to plant 1,500 trees to prevent an eroding hillside from destroying a village, and to compost a community's plant scraps to create a free, natural fertilizer. Students were immensely satisfied with the fruits of their labor, but they were even more thrilled to know that Voces y Manos would be providing each of them with a full scholarship to allow them to further their education and pursue their dreams. The students continued working hard on these projects even after the US volunteers had to return home. As we hear the status updates on the projects, it's clear to all of us that next year when we return, we will be talking not with children, but with active participants and the leaders of the community of Rabinal.



THE SUMMER 2009 VOLUNTEERS

Our summer volunteers included folks from the UCSD School of Medicine, UCLA, and Colorado College.



PETER HARGRAVES: "Last summer, my experience opened my eyes to the vast depth of human potential that we can tap when we simply commit our minds and hearts fully to what we believe. An individual truly can change his or her world for the better."



MICHAEL BAKAL: Voces y Manos has taught me, through experience, that as young people we can change the world. Who would think that a group of University students could partner with 15 Guatemalan High School students to provide health services for over 1,000 people?

Announcing a new opportunity to support Guatemalan scholarship students!



Voces y Manos is excited to announce a new opportunity for supporters to get involved in our program! We have started a scholar sponsorship program to connect young people in rural Guatemala with the resources they need to continue their education and make a long-term impact on their communities.

In Rabinal, most students never get past “Básico” which is the rough equivalent of 10th grade. This is because the vast majority simply cannot pay for the next level, “Diversificado”, which equates to a barebones undergraduate college degree.

Education costs are actually far more prohibitive in Guatemala than they are in the United States. There is absolutely no way that the average family can pay for all--or even some--of its children to pursue higher education.

To help students overcome this obstacle, we are starting a “Diversificado” scholarship program that provides full scholarships to students who show extraordinary motivation and ability to make changes to health and education in their communities.

The program trains and equips students to become educated leaders in the community, then connects them to resources they need to further their educational pursuits. Students are empowered to make lasting change in their community not only for one summer, but for life.

**Please check out our website
www.vocesymanos.org to download
the Scholarship Sponsor Guide!**

THANKS FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

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None of our programs would be possible without the continued support of our donors!

Even though last year was an extremely difficult one financially, our supporters pulled through, ensuring the continued success of our work in Rabinal. Thank you!



VOCES Y MANOS

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