

Despite Initial Obstacles, Medical Mission to San Pedro de las Colonias Treats Close to 1,400

This latest mission was starting to look like it might not take place at all. “We had less than a dozen volunteers signed up with a week to go and the drug wars near the Mexican border were all over the news” said Tino Hernandez, the head of the Austin Diocese Medical Mission. A normal team numbers approximately 30 people. DIF, Desarrollo Integral de la Familia, was eager to get the mission to the families in the areas surrounding San Pedro de las Colonias near Torreon, so they stepped in to help with bringing in medications through customs as well as logistics support and promotion of the mission.

Families of the team members expressed concern about the drug wars and the mission's safety. Larry Nicholson, volunteer and a Vice District Governor for the Lions Club, noted, “Tino always takes the utmost care to ensure the safety of his volunteers. I knew I had nothing to worry about.” The team stayed without incident at a very secure base hotel in San Pedro de las Colonias. “Honestly, the biggest hassle is always crossing the border making sure all of our paperwork in order.” Ironically, the one obstacle they did not face this time was bringing in medications and medical equipment. Tino commented “in the past, we had great difficulty taking the supplies across the border. Now, thanks to the support of local doctors and other contacts, we can now bring the supplies in prior to the mission so we can hit the ground running.” Tino encouraged other organizations seeking assistance in this area to contact him.

A typical mission day involves setting up registration, triage, “offices” for patient visits, the dentists offices, the pharmacy and areas for the patients to wait. Patients often show up as early as 6 AM and in past missions some walked over a day to seek treatment. The team starts seeing patients usually around 9 AM and stops accepting new patients around 3 PM in order for the team to be able to finish up the queue. Illnesses can vary from simple coughs and colds to more serious conditions such as parasites, serious infections, out of control diabetes or high blood pressure. In one of the towns, two related families had boys with hemophilia, which is a rare condition where the blood does not clot easily meaning even simple cuts and bruises can turn life threatening.

Dr. Nathalie Fiset, who flew in from Canada to join the team, expressed how the experience impacted her. “The mission in San Pedro de Las Colonias in Mexico was my ninth with the Austin Medical Mission team. I was truly inspired on the day we offered our services to people who had gone through a flood the year before. They had to rebuild 80 houses. What impressed me most is the pride and courage they displayed, never complaining or feeling like victims. The other strong feeling that emerged from serving these people was the true support and respect they showed one another. The feeling of being in a strong community was powerful.”

You can help by donating to the mission, sponsoring a team member or becoming a team member. Liz Burton-Garcia, who coordinates the medication inventory, noted that “we happily accept medicines but monetary donations are preferred because that allows us to buy the exact medicines we need in bulk and at a discount.” Thanks to generous donations in the fall, for the first time the team had enough vitamins for every person who came to the mission. Another opportunity to financially support the mission is the annual dinner and fundraiser. It will be held on September 12, 2009 at St. William Church with musical entertainment and highlights from previous missions.

Rebeca Dominguez, the assistant to DIF director Josefina Moreno de Babún, commented how she was amazed that the volunteers use their own vacation time and pay their own way, providing all the services and medication at no charge. “You never see anything like this”, she said. Many of the

volunteers couldn't make it on the missions without the help of sponsors. Azucena Overman said, "I was recently laid off and didn't think I could go, but thanks to a generous gift, I was able to work in the pharmacy translating and filling prescriptions. With the small size of the team, I was definitely needed." Volunteers agree that this is not the cheapest or most relaxing way to spend a vacation, but definitely the most rewarding. Larry Nicholson enthused that "this was the most awesome opportunity to be of service to others".

The team is always looking for medical professionals including doctors, dentists, pharmacists, chiropractors, acupuncturists and nurses. Translators help the medical professionals with patient visits and dispensing of medication in the pharmacy. Volunteers without a medical background are also welcome, often working in registration or the pharmacy or handling crowd control. Future opportunities to volunteer include a weekend mission to Piedras Negras, Mexico, June 27-28, 2009 and a week long mission to Arteaga, Mexico, October 3-9, 2009.

You can learn more about the Austin Diocese Medical Mission by visiting the website www.austincatholicmedicalmission.org or by calling Tino Hernandez at (512) 259-5746.