

*encuentros breves crean amistades duraderas\** Cuban proverb

**Person-to-Person Exchanges in el Salvador**  
**By Caitlin Stiglmeier, M.D.**

The third year for myself. The first time for many. The tenth year of partnership with this rural community in Rancho Grande, El Salvador. Every year another adventure, a week of heaven on earth.

Getting 75 high school students to obtain visas and move through customs is the first daunting obstacle once we land in San Salvador; 145 suitcases are pushed, pulled, and dragged from the baggage claim, through security into the warm night air and loaded into an old cargo truck. Inevitably, there are lost passports, lost bags, sequestered items, and wide-eyed stares from first-time adults and students alike. Will all the bags make it through? Will all the medicine get confiscated? How are we going to fit 90 people, plus carry-ons, onto one school bus for the 2-hour drive to the village? Who is going to feed all of us?!

During the week, multiple times on a daily basis, small miracles occur that enable this trip to occur. The miracle of the bags. The miracle of water. The miracle of the human-to-outhouse ratio: 20:1. The miracle of adequate amounts of medicine for the village, of food for our group, of having enough space to sleep 50 women on the concrete floor of the community center. Each year, my faith is tested; each year I think, this will be the year we run out of food. This will be the year the outhouse overflows. This will be the year we run out of the one antibiotic we really need. And we'll have to become even more creative in finding solutions for these problems. Every year, I'm wrong.

This year, I was more wrong than ever. Hilariously wrong. And yet I still doubt. But human nature, right? Once the school buses, painted with neon flames along the sides and boasting slogans of "Jesus Christo Numero Uno"& "Dios Es El Camino!" start rolling through the velvety humid night, the reality that we are here begins to make its way through the group. It is a feeling like the breeze flowing in through the bus windows: a familiar, fragrant thickness. Comforting, hopeful. Peaceful. We arrive in Rancho in the dark- the ever-present dust percolates through the headlights of the buses as we unload & divide the bags into piles: boys sleeping bags, girls sleeping bags, school supplies, clinic supplies. Instructions are simple: leave the supplies, take the sleeping bags. Girls in the community center, boys in the school. We wheel down the dusty road from Mariano's, the central meeting place for the week, and take a left to the community center, a fenced-in concrete structure with one of two wells in the community, and 3 outhouses in the back. On the floor we line up futons, and then ourselves on top: head-to-head, feet-to-wall, bags at the perimeter. Geckos chirp & girls shriek at any unusual sound, and I am reminded that I'm sharing a single room for a week with 40 high school girls.

\* Brief encounters create lasting friendships.

In the morning, the nervous silent girls become even more silent: seeing the actuality of where they are: dirt roads pocked with rocks, houses made of concrete, brick, tin, grass. The grubby ecstatic children peering through the fence-line that they share with their livestock. The banana fields that stretch out towards hazy volcanic peaks. It feels at once insular and unlimited: there are no other signs of civilization to be seen outside the village limits, and yet the dusty tracks bring motorcycles, bicycles, horse-drawn carts, and rusty trucks bumbling through, but from where? We walk back to Mariano's for breakfast; all our meals are made from food brought in from San Salvador. The Young Life leader in San Salvador, Enrique, brings his wife and her talented friends to cook for us every year. From a single bare room stocked with piles of ingredients, portable gas cooktops, and five women come three meals a day: eggs, frijoles, queso, and papaya. Fresh El Salvadorian coffee every morning. Steak, pico de gallo, rice. We eat like royalty; the line for each meal snakes around the plastic chairs and wooden tables and appears endless. Teenage boys move through the chaos for leftovers, like wild animals in search of prey. Every meal I think we will run out of something: eggs, spaghetti sauce, meat, chairs to seat everyone, a place for every person's plate. But every year, no matter how many more people we bring on the trip, the serving spoon continues to dish up beans from a continuously near-empty pot. There are just enough chairs, people move over and squeeze in and our plates are all touching around the table, and food has never tasted better, laughter never more contagious. We are covered in dust, we are sweating constantly, and no one notices or minds.

After breakfast we break into groups: the medical team heads to the clinic, teenage boys and some girls group together to dig ditches and clear fields with machetes. Others come to help in the clinic, build chicken coops, repair and build tilapia ponds to provide sources of protein for the community. The community members group together to decide where said ditches need to be dug, whose field is set for clearing, and round up their buddies. We work together, Upstate New York teenagers next to El Salvadorians- grown men in their fields, women and children in the school, families in the clinic. The two-room clinic attached to the community center is opened, belching out dust and rat droppings as the iron doors creak. We clean, dust, bleach as best we can with Clorox wipes and multiple trips to the well. We arrange the piles of soap, shampoo, baby products, dental hygiene products, over-the-counter medicine and prescription medicine in piles, taking stock of the expiring medications and leftover supplies. My first year, I was the only resident physician on the trip, and the only resident that had been on the trip for over 5 years. Last year, it was easy to recruit my colleague and friend Vanessa to the trip; this year her and I recruited our two other good friends and colleagues, Liz and Sarah. We went from 2 physicians my first year to 5 this year!! Our mentor Dr. D has been on the trip every year since its start 10 years ago, and jokes he can now spend his time in El Sal in a hammock instead!

We arrive Thursday night; by Friday we usually hope to have the clinic cleaned out, organized, and ready for Saturday morning to begin seeing patients. This year, (small daily miracles!), we were seeing patients by Friday afternoon! Our goal is to see every family in the community (50+ families, roughly 200+ people); they are triaged outside first with nurses and students helping, then seen inside as a family. Each family is given a hygiene kit with soap, shampoo, conditioner, daily vitamins, an anti-parasitic pill, and other medications they need based on their visit. On plastic chairs, with a single fan in a single room, we see newborns and 80-year-olds, families of 12, and single men and women. Each comes in smiling and leaves smiling, regardless of whether we can truly solve their medical problems or only give

them ibuprofen. Unless there is a major medical complication, we are the only medical attention these people receive in the year. They are grateful for even those ten minutes we spend on them individually.

My first year, as we had only 3 doctors, we stayed in Rancho Grande to ensure everyone in that village was seen. Last year, Vanessa (fluent in Spanish) and I created an even-more makeshift clinic on the island of Monte Cristo, where we spend our Sunday on the trip relaxing as a group. We stayed overnight Sunday night, bringing with us a small backpack of personal items and a duffel bag of medicine; we set up tarps and a table that served as our “outdoor” clinic in a pit of dirt, and saw the 80+ people on the island who have even more limited access to healthcare (think boat access only, and according to tides, there may be no access at all for 12 hours...). This year, Vanessa and I took another little side-trip to the village of La Pita, a port-town, and another place where the villagers have no regular doctor. We set up a clinic in an open-air pavilion, had our trusty duffel bag of medicine (sometimes it felt a little bit like we were drug-dealers, in a really cool Netflix-original kind of way), and were able to see the 100+ villagers in two days! A lot of the problems in the villages range from constipation in children, parasitic infections, fungal infections, headaches, to arthritis in adults, possible cancer, wounds that were never properly closed with sutures, and lots of pain: sore backs, tired bones from working in the fields, headaches from dehydration, and diabetes. We do our best, give what medicine we can to help, and if necessary, attempt to convince them to see a doctor on a more regular basis, though transportation and costs are an obvious issue.

The week flies by, as always. There’s always a high-school student from our group who cuts himself with a machete, which leads to an audience for the suturing. Miraculously, no one was bit by a scorpion this year, although we had an all-time high count of 14 in our sleeping quarters alone. This year, to celebrate ten years of serving the community, we had a party, El Salvador style. Someone from the village knew someone who had knew someone who had a flatbed truck that they parked sideways, serving as the stage. They strung homemade streamers up from the outhouses to the tents we ate meals under, and had a giant speaker set up for the dance party that ensued. The dirt was sprayed with water to minimize the dust, which led to El Salvadorian children dancing with Upstate New York high schoolers in a mud pit to Justin Bieber. It. Was. Glorious.

Every year, it becomes difficult to say who truly benefitted more from our trip- the El Salvadorians or the Americans. While there isn’t that definitive of a divide between us while we are there, it always seems bittersweet to load the buses with all the white kids, and leave the others behind. We all know we can’t take them with us, and that humanitarian aide isn’t perfect; every year we question if we shouldn’t use the money it takes for all of us simply to travel down there to put towards projects? What can we do better? Has any of this been beneficial? Yet we can see the clear delineation of children who were born before clean water wells were built in the village versus those after- the children after are of normal height & weight, growing properly, not stunted, healthy. The community in general is less and less ill. And while it does cost money to get 75 high school students to rural El Salvador each year, it is beneficial. For many, their first time out of the state, on an airplane, out of the country, without a cell phone, Facebook, and a daily shower. For many students, and even adults, they return with new perspective: they are grateful for simple things like water & mattresses. They see what community looks like across ethnicity & socio-economic

boundaries. They have received instant gratification from doing manual labor for the first time: look at that ditch we dug!, look at that field we cleared!, look at that chicken coop we built! They have forgotten about their parents divorce, their drug addiction, their SAT scores, if only for a moment, and seen other realities, though not necessarily more or less important, from their own. Small miracles. Each year there are different ways in which this week has changed the trajectory of many lives; it certainly has changed mine for the better. It is my hope that we have & continue to be a part of changing the lives of these beautiful El Salvadorian people as best we know how.