



Mission of Love



"You are not here to save the world, but to touch the hands that are within your reach."
~ Kathleen Price

WAY-bi Mission of LOVE ~ Bob Price

In January, I joined 14 other Mission of Love volunteers in a trip to Guatemala. My wife Kathy, of course, organized the trip and was the prime mover. Our grandson Edward Keich also traveled with us. Edward will be 18 next week, so he was the youngest volunteer, but one of the most enthusiastic. He worked all of last summer to raise the air fare so he could make this trip, and his family is so very proud of him for making the same sacrifice that all MOL volunteers make when we travel. In order to go to a foreign country for a week we must lose time from our families, our work or school, and pay for the privilege of doing so. More importantly, we leave our comfort zones and go to a place where we don't understand the language, the money, or the customs. We sleep in strange beds, take cold showers, and eat unfamiliar food. The physical work is hard, very hard, and you pay the price in aches and pains. Why would any American in their right mind do such a thing? The answer to that question is simple. We, all of us, returned to our homes as better people than we were when we left. Please allow me to tell you about our trip and maybe you will understand.

We arrived in Guatemala City on Wednesday afternoon. All 14 of us were met by our limo driver. Our limo was an old American school bus. He took us directly to Metropolitan Hospital where lunch was waiting. Guatemala City is a metropolis of 1 1/2 million souls, but it swells to 3 million when workers come in every day to go to their jobs. It is a city of grand monuments and sky scrapers. There is also an inner city where the poor live. Metropolitan Hospital is not a sky scraper. It is a three story building on a side street and you would not know that it was there if you were not looking for it. It is also part of the inner city. The doors are kept locked, and a guard determines who gets in. Americans do not walk these streets alone. Guatemalans have no choice.

Kathy came to know Dr. Edgar Moran, the surgical director, when she was scrambling to find a place where volunteer American physicians could perform cleft palate surgery on Guatemalan children. Dr. Moran volunteered his hospital and his services and in the last two years 46 kids have received new smiles because of the



kindness of volunteers and physicians from both countries. These miracle surgeries were part of an ongoing dream come true for the Mission of Love and all of the people who help to make these things happen. Dr. Moran and his wife Claudia also have a dream. They dream of creating a hospice in the country, where the air is not grey, and armed men don't guard the door. They want to create a haven where children with terminal illness can come with their



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families and interact with pets that are raised on a farm associated with the hospice. After the child passes, the family keeps the pet. Mission of Love and Dr. Moran found a shared purpose, to provide comfort and care to children who might not otherwise receive it.

After our limo delivered us to the hospital, we climbed the three levels to a small dining area. We met the staff as well as the cooks preparing our meal. Somehow, they all seemed to be related to Dr. Moran and shared in his vision. I am not exaggerating when I tell you that our chicken was seasoned with a generous portion of love. These people, all of them, were so very happy to see us, and they loved that we were there. It was so apparent that after lunch, despite the fact that most of us had been awake since 3 AM and had spent 6 hours on a plane, we unanimously decided not to go to our hotel, but to stay at the hospital to do some painting and repair. We returned the next day, and painted about everything that didn't move, replaced broken light fixtures, and did some carpentry work.

I must tell you about our hotel in Guatemala City because of the contrast between it and the lives of ordinary Guatemalans. It was one of the tall modern buildings with swimming pool, spa and three restaurants. It is probably the nicest place I have ever stayed. While we were there, the President of Columbia visited and stayed where we were. Of course, a security guard admitted you through an iron gate. The luxury was nice. Friday morning, it ended. We boarded our limo for the trip through the mountains to the town of Tec Pan, and the nearby facility of Way Bi, where the building site for the hospice was located. On the forty mile trip, we saw more of the real Guatemala as we left the city and entered the mountains. We saw Mayan men traveling the roads on horseback and Mayan women not any taller than five foot dressed in the same traditional clothing that their ancestors had been making for hundreds of years, carrying baskets on their heads. Our bus struggled up hills and then carefully worked it's way down the other side of the hill, in low gear, navigating the switchbacks. We passed through Tec Pan on our trip to Way Bi. The volunteers who had never been to Guatemala before saw the narrow streets and store front bodegas. That ninety minute trip was worth an entire year of geography classes.

Finally, we arrived at our destination, Way Bi (pronounced way-bee, the Mayan translation is "house of dreams"). We immediately unloaded our gear and went to the job site, about 300 feet straight uphill through a forest. The climb up that hill was enough to make a young man feel old and to make an old man question his own sanity. Fortunately, the very afternoon we arrived a back hoe cut a path through the trees to make the climb marginally easier. This was important because we had to make the climb several times a day. Later, I learned that we were 7,000 feet above sea level. The air was thin and it made physical exertion considerably more difficult. Standing on top of the mountain and looking out over the valley was an entirely different type of breathtaking experience.



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The work we had to do was fairly simple to understand, but difficult to do. First we had to dig holes to specific dimensions to serve as spot footers for a building. This is basic pick and shovel work. Our Guatemalan foreman, Juan, taught us how to bend and shape re-bar to go into the holes to form part of the footer. We made wooden forms to receive the concrete. And, of course, we mixed and transported the concrete, all by hand. Water had to be toted up hill in buckets. The sand and gravel were brought up by wheel barrow and then mixed on the ground. We did have considerable help in these labors. Among the hardest workers were the Guatemalans themselves, including Dr. Moran and his wife who were slinging shovels and wheel barrows with the rest of us. This guy is a surgeon, but he wasn't about to ask Americans to do things that he wasn't willing to do himself.

Juan, the foreman, was one tough, smart hombre. He didn't speak a word of English, but he taught us by example the proper construction methods we needed to know. He wasn't afraid to point to me, and point to a shovel and a pile of sand. I got the point. He also understood when a volunteer, (me) was running out of gas. He simply took the shovel from my hand and jumped down into the hole himself. After three full days of this type of work, we completed our goal of creating 36 spot footers. The holes were dug, the re-bar placed, and the concrete was curing. It was time to head back to the city before returning home. We were told that we had saved months of construction time by our efforts. As we were walking down the hill for blessedly, the last time. Juan asked if we could stop and take a picture. He also wanted to say thank you. Through an interpreter, Juan thanked us for our work. He said that he had never met people like us. Then he stopped. He said that he was too emotional. That is when some of us told Jose that we were honored to work with him, and that we would return soon to continue the work. That is when the tough hombre wept.

It would be inaccurate if I tried to tell you that all of our time in Guatemala was hardship. It was not. We had wonderful times with our friends, Dr. Moran and his family, including a dinner party at his home. We enjoyed each other. We visited Mayan ruins at Iximche and the old Spanish City of Antigua. Each time I visit Guatemala, I learn so much more about another culture, and I learn so much about myself. I think that the experience will help Edward to grow from fine a fine boy to a fine man. This week was one of the best experiences of my life. I have formed bonds with Americans and Guatemalans that I hope will last a lifetime.

The Mission of Love will return to Guatemala to continue the work. There is going to be an air lift from Ohio to Guatemala with supplies for both Way Bi, Metropolitan Hospital and a school for the blind. We will follow the airlift in. I invite you to come.