

In El Salvador, a Holiday for Helping

By Judy Colbert

Photo by Judy Colbert

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As Yom Kippur passed, I thought of being in El Salvador at this time last year. I didn't set out to be there for the New Year holidays, but through a serendipitous event, I learned of a nonprofit volunteer medical mission going to El Salvador.

I called to see if I could join the group, though my Spanish is almost nonexistent and I have no medical background. I was told there were plenty of things I could do.

Some two dozen volunteers from across the country went on that trip: doctors, nurses, an audiologist, an optometrist, a physical therapist, dental and pharmacy assistants, an emergency medical technician, and other, nonmedical, personnel. Some had been on previous trips; others, like myself, were new to the experience.

Because I'd been to El Salvador just a few months earlier for a wedding, I knew what to expect in the way of daily thunderstorms during the rainy season, the friendliness of just about everyone we met, and the beauty of the mountainous terrain. Other than that, I had no expectations and absolutely no preparation for all the surprises, joy and sorrow I'd face.

Church leaders had spread the word throughout the nearby communities that we'd be visiting, so there were 100 people waiting for us on the first day. It was minor chaos as the triage team sorted them according to their needs. We'd see more than 3,500 patients during the week.

On the first day Jimmie Gilbert, an orthopedist, saw a woman in her twenties who'd had polio as a child. Since then, she'd been getting around by being carried in a blanket sling or crawling. He put her in a wheelchair. Although much of the country isn't "accessible," there's enough that her life will be forever changed. We'd give away another four wheelchairs, several walkers, crutches and braces before the end of the week, but that first day was victory enough to justify my time and expenses.

The optical section gave away some 650 pairs of prescription glasses, including a pair for our bus driver. One lady, perhaps in her fifties, not only wanted glasses, but she wanted pretty ones. She was delighted and beamed as she looked at herself in the mirror. Yes, something good happens to those donated glasses.

Audiologist Tricia Riley made molds for 60 hearing aids. Jeff Morrison, a dentist, pulled more than 600 teeth. At the pharmacy, where I worked, we dispensed vitamins, blood pressure pills, cold remedies and other medications.

We can only imagine how much impact we had on their lives by doing so little.

The week was not all victorious, though. A woman in her thirties had incurable and inoperable cancer, and two young daughters. There was nothing we could do for her except listen to her fears. There was also the woman whose diabetes had diminished her eyesight, who pleaded, "You're my last hope. You're American doctors and I hoped you could do something." We couldn't.

Perhaps most surprising was seeing six-pointed stars adorning homes and businesses in the towns and countryside. I learned that some Salvadorans, after their 12-year revolution, had developed an affinity for Israel, forming "Amigos de Israel" to show their support for the fight for freedom.

Over Yom Kippur, instead of fasting and being in a shul, the Jewish members of our group believed we were doing good deeds, in our own prayer place.

Early afternoon on the day of Yom Kippur, a couple of local entertainers set up a sound system and sang Israeli folk songs, in Hebrew, including "Hava Nagila." We sang and clapped and the night, blanketed with stars (or as I was told in my childhood, the world's birthday candles) in the Central American sky, soared with song. It was the most unusual and wonderful Yom Kippur I ever celebrated. I bought three of the performers' CDs and get goose bumps anew every time I play them.