



October, 2017

Dear Friends

You've heard that old adage, "Third times a charm"? Well, it turns out that it takes four for some of us. Fr. Fred Elskamp, my wife, Carolyn, and I just returned from a trip to Merida. The trip was great, but it was a long time in coming.

We were originally ticketed to go on August 21. We had a dear friend die and United Airlines was kind enough to waive penalties and change our tickets to August 28 so that we could attend the funeral. Of course, the last weekend in August was when Hurricane Harvey hit, and since United only flies to Merida through Houston, we were rescheduled for September 4. Then United changed its schedule after the hurricane and we had to change ours once again.



We had to leave home at 3:00 am and take three flights to get to Merida on September 26, but it immediately felt worth it once we finally arrived. There was the usual confusion caused by two suitcases full of used glasses and donated rosaries, but we managed to get through customs without paying any import taxes.

We did not waste much time getting down to work. Over dinner that first evening, we planned out our schedule for the week. We wanted to make sure that we visited at least one of the nutrition sites and Luis suggested that we work in the area of Eknakan, the place where we set up our very first site outside of the city of Merida.



In keeping with the schedule long followed by Dorothy and Rudy, we packed up our glasses and left the hotel by 8:00 the next morning. We drove about an hour to Lepad, a small, very poor village in the Eknakan municipality.

We explained to local officials what we wanted to do, and like most, they were very welcoming. They scrounged an old table and a couple of plastic chairs and we set up shop in a covered community gathering space. Like magic, people just started appearing on the empty streets. I didn't see many cell phones in that town, but the residents must have had some form

in instant messaging.

This was the first time Carolyn, Fr. Fred and I were on our own with neither Dorothy nor Rudy. There was a bit of anxiety on the part of all of us, but we need not have wasted the time or energy. For some reason, Lepad was one of the easiest places we have ever visited.

Of course, on the first day, we had a lot of glasses to choose from, and a good supply of readers. There were also fewer elderly people or youngsters with more challenging visual problems. Regardless, we worked well into the afternoon, at times all four of us fitting glasses. We probably attended to nearly over 200 people that first day.

On the second day, we visited the school in Eknakan before we began our work with the glasses. By the time we got there, again almost an hour away, we missed the daily meal served to the students before classes begin. However, we did get to see the impact of that nutritious breakfast.



Alejandra, the school's principal, greeted us warmly and gave us a tour of the K-6 classes of her school. In every classroom, the children were attentive, polite, but also full of energy. They giggled as they explained what they were studying and tried out the few words of English they had learned. They were vocally appreciative when Alejandra told them that we were from the group that supplied the food for their breakfasts.

Alejandra and her faculty members were also grateful for our support. They told us about how important the meals were, especially for those children from very poor families who didn't have much meat or other protein in their home diet.

The principal went on to explain that our example inspired a group of parents to help as well. Most days, volunteers from among the parents bring in some homemade snack item for the students. On the day we were there, we met a mother carting in a pot full of tamales. These foods are given to the students at a morning break, tiding them over until they go home at 1:30. The parents and teachers also collect money for a nutritional supplement they occasionally add to the milk we provide.

The involvement of parents in our nutritional sites is one of our criteria of success. It indicates that we are meeting a real need if parents are willing to give up of their time to support the program. It also is a good sign that they are taking some ownership. Luis showed us shopping lists from the schools at Telchaquillo and Pixyah where the parents are asking for specific ingredients so that they can prepare the meals for their kids. This interest in their children's health and nutrition at school carries over into the home.

When we left the school, we moved on to the town of Homun. At first, all we knew about the place was that it was relatively large and that Rudy and Dorothy had not visited there in a while. Later that day, Luis told us that Homun was the first place that Dorothy had given out glasses exactly forty years ago. It felt good to come back to the place where it all began, and a bit humbling to think of all the people that Dorothy helped over these four decades.





Whenever Carolyn or I ran into a particularly difficult case – an older person who spoke no Spanish, only Mayan or someone with an obvious eye condition, we would pass them along to Luis. He was very patient and good-natured. Usually, he could find something that would help. If the situation with their eyes was critical, he would impress upon them the need to get to a doctor and explain the risk they took if they did not.

At one point Luis had a very elderly man who had a severe visual impairment. As Luis was looking through the glasses, I asked him what he needed. He said, “This guy is almost blind. Do we have anything really strong, like a seven or eight?”

I had just pulled a rare eight out of a bag and I handed it to him. ‘Tú eres un especialista,’ I kidded him. “You are a specialist.”

“No, no,” he replied, laughing. He put the glasses on the man and suddenly the man’s face became one big grin. “Ya veo!” he said, ‘Now I can see!’ Luis turned to me and said, ‘Well, maybe I am.’

The next day, again at Homun, Luis walked over to where I was working with an older man he obviously knew well. He introduced the man as Rosalio, named after St. Rose of Lima on whose feast day he was born. Luis said that Rosalio’s friends call him Chalk, maybe a misspelling of the Mayan Chaac, the god of rain, but no one knows how or why he got this nickname.

Forty years ago, Rosalio, or Chalk, worked for Luis on a survey crew. When Dorothy told Luis, who also worked as a guide, that she wanted to bring used glasses to some people in the villages, Luis mentioned it to Rosalio who convinced him of the need in Homun.

Rosalio spread the word through neighboring villages and when Dorothy arrived on her next visit, he had hundreds of people waiting outside his little thatched roof house. His first words to Dorothy were, “I am sorry to be so poor.” With the love he had for his people, something he still shows today, Dorothy thought he was one of the wealthiest men she had ever met.

The spirit of humility and gratitude that Rosalio showed 40 years ago is still alive and well in Homun. Before we left on the second day, a woman with a brightly colored woven handbag motioned me to come over to her. She introduced herself as Fanny and said that she wanted to thank us for the glasses we gave her and her neighbors in Homun. Inside the bag, she had four pieces of painted plaster artwork and some embroidered cloths which she wanted to give to us. It wasn’t a cheap gift and we offered to pay, but she insisted that we already had.

Despite all of these happening, it may be the last day that was the most memorable. Leaving Homun, we had only 77 pair of plus power glasses remaining and, in most villages, very few people require minuses. The glasses were picked over, with no readers and a lot of high correction prescriptions remaining. We decided to go to a village close to Merida, hoping we may get lucky and be able to help a few people, but realistically planning for a quick return.



We went to Dzununcan, which is located just outside of Merida, beyond the airport and beyond our nutrition site of Emmanuel. Another very poor village, we set up on the sidewalk outside the house of someone we happened to meet on the street. As the line got longer, I wondered how many people we were going to disappoint because we did not have the glasses they needed.

Something bordering on the miraculous happened that morning. The Lord guided in people with the right eyes for the glasses we had. By the time Carolyn finished the last person we could help, we had given away every one of those 77 pairs and at least a dozen or so minuses to boot. We were able to help about 90 people that day. It was the first time that we were able to use every pair we brought.

One other thing about Dzununcan. Someone failed to mention the fact that a wave a conjunctivitis had passed through the town. By the time Carolyn and I returned to Missouri, we both had raging cases of pink eye.



Still, we'd both do it all over again tomorrow. We are so blessed to be able to help these people and to witness the sheer delight of those who can see clearly again for the first time in years, or for some of the children, for the first time ever. We are so blessed hear the laughter and literally feel the hope of some of the more than 700 children and sick we are feeding.

Most of all though, we are so blessed by you. Your care and your generosity is what makes the work of the Merida Foundation so successful. Your contribution makes a difference each day for the children and the elderly who benefits from the food you help provide. We cannot do it without you.

Sincerely,

Mark

Mark Saucier
President, Merida Foundation.

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