



December 2017 Newsletter

Dear Friends,

Question: What begins at 3:00 a.m. on a Friday and ends at 3:00 a.m. the following Thursday? The answer for us was our most recent visit to Merida from December 8 through 13. Merida Foundation board members Pat Joyce, Larry Lewis and Greg Mihalevich made the trip along with Greg's wife, Lois, Greg's niece, Jessica Arciero, from San Francisco and Pat's friend, Jane Smith, from Washington, D.C.

As we mentioned in our last newsletter getting to Mexico is not always a straight forward process. After a 7:00 a.m. flight from Saint Louis, we met Jane at the Atlanta airport as a cold front was moving through. Our flight was delayed 2 hours and by the time we boarded the plane it was snowing, a rare event in Atlanta. We then spent nearly 4 hours sitting on the plane driving from place to place at the airport until we finally got our turn to have our jet sprayed with festively-colored green and orange deicing chemicals before we were allowed to take off. Instead of getting to Merida at 2:00 p.m. as scheduled we got there at 8:00 p.m. where Luis Franco was patiently waiting for us. Jessica's flight was due in Merida about 30 minutes after we finally arrived and she was pleasantly surprised when we met her with open arms at the airport. She had planned to take a taxi to our hotel.



The next morning, Saturday, December 9th, we all piled into the van and Luis drove us to the village of

Teabo which is about 50 miles south of Merida. Luis told us that Dorothy had given out glasses here about 10 years ago. Along the road we began to see groups of people either on foot or riding bikes or motorcycles or in the back of open trucks decorated with balloons, palm fronds and banners with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. December 12th is the feast day commemorating her appearance to Juan Diego near what is now Mexico City in 1531 and it continues to be a huge celebration in Mexico every year. Many of these people were carrying statues of Our Lady of Guadalupe to be blessed at certain churches then carried back to their homes or churches. One of the main destinations for these pilgrims is the church of San Cristobal in Merida.

At Teabo we set up under the covered portico at the main municipal building and busily fitted about 300 villagers with free eye glasses for the next 3 hours. This was Jane and Jessica's first time giving out glasses with the Merida Foundation and they jumped in with both feet. During the day helped give out rosaries, searched the table when someone fitting glasses called out "I need a +225" and even took a turn at fitting people with glasses.



Another useful function they provided was crowd control. The word for queue in Spanish is "cola". We usually set up a table with lots of glasses spread out it make it easier to search for the proper prescription for our customers. If we don't occasionally encourage folks to get back in line the table gradually become surrounded by curious villagers wanting to see what's going on or trying glasses on for themselves. A friendly "Cola. Cola." will get the line formed again giving us room to work.

As we finished up for the day, the mayor of Teabo came by and thanked us profusely for our service to the people of his village and invited us to come back the next day. After church the next morning we came back and gave out another 300 or so glasses. The mayor stopped by that day also and thanked us again for "enabling my people to see". On our drive to and from Teabo



was saw even more Guadalupe pilgrims along the road.



Monday morning found us headed down the same road south out of Merida again. This time, though, our plan was to visit two or three of our nine nutrition sites before giving out more glasses. We wanted to be at the schools when the kids were there. Our first stop was Xcanchacan. The number of 5 and 6-year-old kindergarteners at this school has increased from 80 to 99 in the last year. The school didn't have any cooking facilities and the cook would have to carry the food from the school to her mother's house 4 blocks down the street, cook it, then carry it back 4 blocks

to the school. Recently the Merida Foundation bought the school a wood-fired cook stove and paid for a rough shelter for a kitchen all for less than \$50 US. This saves the cook time and energy and now the kids can get a hot meal instead of a sort-of-hot meal every day. We also got to see the new refrigerator the foundation bought the school. Luis delivers food once a week to each nutrition site and the new refrigerator helps keep the food fresh between deliveries.

As we were getting ready to leave, one of the teachers brought out a choir of 14 of her kids and they sang *Deck the Halls* to us. In Mayan! The tune was familiar and fa-la-la-la-laaa is the same in any language, but we had to trust that the kids got the rest of the words to the song right. What a great Christmas present!



Our next stop was at the school at Telchaquillo who have 80 kids that benefit from our nutrition program. They already have a small refrigerator but they are trading that in and the Merida Foundation is helping to pay for a larger one. The power supply in the villages is not totally reliable and they sometimes experience power surges which can burn out the motor or compressor in a refrigerator. The



foundation is planning to buy three voltage regulators which will protect the refrigerators at three of the nutrition sites. The regulators aren't very expensive and will pay for themselves if they keep even one motor from burning up.

We bought some bananas and tangerines from a local vendor and made our way down the road to the village of Mama not far away ("ma" means "no" in Mayan – we have no clue as to why the village has this name). It was noon when we arrived

which turned out to be good for the younger kids who were getting out of school for the day and in need of glasses. We were able to improve the vision of a lot of children in Mama.

On our third visit to one of the foundation's nutrition sites at the school at Yaxkukul, Larry and Pat were able to visit with the mother of one of the graduates of the nutrition program. The single mother had been supporting two of her children while holding down two jobs. Her son Milton Elias Pech Uc is 15



years old and is currently enrolled as a sophomore at a college prep school in Merida. As some of you may recall, Milton tested second in the nation in mathematics when he was in sixth grade at Yaxkukul. Last year when he was a freshman in high school he tested fourth in the nation in mathematics.

While visiting with Milton and his mother, he described his daily routine. He leaves his village at 4:30 a.m. so that he can take a bus to Merida. He then transfers to another bus to arrive at his school,

Escuela Preparatoia Uno by 7:00 a.m. He then goes back home and works on homework often until 2:00 a.m. Milton attends school six days a week and on Saturday he works on English and computers. Luis's grandson attends the same school and says it is a very demanding school. We are keeping in contact with Milton and will keep you updated on his progress. It was an honor to meet him.

During our trip we were able to help more than 1,000 Yucatecans have a clearer outlook on life thanks to your continued support of the Merida Foundation. Without your help the foundation couldn't provide all the assistance we do for the people of the Yucatan. Thank you. If you are able to give an additional financial Christmas present to the Merida Foundation we would appreciate your tax-deductible contribution.

Oh, one last thing. We did make it down to the church of San Cristobal in Merida to witness the gathering of hundreds of Our Lady of Guadalupe pilgrims on Monday evening. The church's twin bell towers were lit with red and green lights and bouquets of flowers filled the church yard. The church itself was packed with people. Others gathered outside the doors trying to see inside and the crowd flowed into the streets. Music was playing, food vendors were set up on along the curbs and everyone seemed to be enjoying the night. More pilgrims were arriving even as we walked back to our hotel. It was quite an experience.



Merry Christmas!