



Merida Foundation

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Dear Friends,

We hope you had a great summer. While the schools in Mexico were closed for summer and most of our nutrition program with them, the Merida Foundation has been very busy. We spent the summer gathering, measuring, and organizing our inventory of glasses in preparation for an August visit to Merida. We were also in discussion about adding some schools to our list of sites.

We'll get to the new sites later in this letter, but we want to start with our recent trip. On August 20th, Fr. Fred Elskamp, Carolyn Saucier, and Mark Saucier left Jefferson City at 2:00 am to catch a predawn flight out of St. Louis to Miami and then on to Merida. It wasn't the most convenient time to travel, but it was the cheapest and that is always a consideration when you're trying to feed hundreds of hungry kids.

Our travel was uneventful, but our arrival was not. We passed through immigration fine, but soon found ourselves delayed at the baggage claim. Our bags must have been among the last to be unloaded from the plane. We waited until we were the last passengers there and there were no more bags on the carousel. One of our two suitcases of glasses did not arrive. It took many phone calls and a lot of time on hold to get the bag to our hotel 48 hours later.



Nevertheless, we persisted. We went to the small village of Baca the first day. The second day we went to Yaxkukul where we sponsor a nutritional program at the school. We had to stop earlier than we wanted that day because we just didn't have the selection of glasses we needed without the second suitcase. We more than made up for that the following two days when we returned to Yaxkukul where we were never without a line of people waiting.

While we want to report on our trips, they probably sound all the same to anyone who hasn't had the opportunity to be on one. The truth is, there is a certain sameness and monotony to our schedule, but we don't notice it because we are so busy and the people are always so engaging. Still, we need to write a newsletter that is interesting and informative to our donors. So, from time to time, we are going to do something a little different.

In this one, rather than a day-by-day diary of the trip, Fr. Fred and Carolyn share their reflections about the trip and the work of the Merida Foundation. We'll begin with Fr. Fred, a long-time

friend and supporter of Rudy and Dorothy. Fr. Fred's words may be old news to some, but it never hurts to be reminded of our roots.

I COULD NOT SEE...

"Is it hot down there?" I asked. "No hotter than Missouri," said Rudy Lemke, who was serving as sacristan for the daily 6:30 Mass at the cathedral. I was pastor at the time, and he was urging me to go down to Yucatan to see what kind of work he and his wife Dorothy were doing. That was in 2000. I went. It was hot. I found out it is always hot down there.

For years, Dorothy, a retired optician, had been distributing used eyeglasses to the natives in the rural villages outside of Merida, the capital and largest city in Mexico's Yucatan state. Rudy soon shared Dorothy's love of the Mayan people and suggested that the two of them go down a couple of times a year.



In their visits, they saw the malnutrition among the villagers. They responded by starting the Merida Foundation. Through the Foundation, they would not only continue with the glasses, but also provide food to selected grade schools in and around Merida. They invested much of their own money in the project.

I was hooked, too, and frequently accompanied Dorothy and Rudy on their trips. One evening, after a long hot day in a village, we were back in the hotel in Merida. Dorothy, who had lots of energy in those days, wanted me to go with her to see the traditional dances down at the city center. It was not far from the hotel, so we walked.

On the way back, Dorothy fell on her knees and embraced a beggar woman who had no legs. It was obvious, though one did not speak the language of the other, that there was a special bond. After first meeting her, Dorothy and Rudy brought her a wooden, hand-propelled cart to get around her village. Dorothy's response on seeing the woman again showed how much love and care is in the heart of Dorothy.

She and Rudy don't go down there anymore due to age and infirmity, but the Merida Foundation continues the great work they began. What wonderful things are still being accomplished because of this couple!

When we were there in August, we spent three days working in a large pueblo called Yaxkukul. The lines were long and the people standing in line were very patient. They badly needed glasses they could never afford.

A woman came up and explained, "I need money and I make money by sewing for people but I cannot see to thread the needle." She reached in her purse and pulled out a needle and thread to demonstrate her problem. A few minutes later, she was thrilled as Carolyn picked up just the

right prescription to match her middle-aged eyes. Those eyes lit up as they came to focus clearly on the newspaper held in front of her. She felt obliged to give each of us a big hug.

Your donation to the Merida Foundation makes this possible. However, the big expense is not the distribution of the glasses, which are donated. Our big cost, and it concerns a cause very close to my heart, is the care we give to hundreds of children down there. The kids there almost all suffer from malnutrition, which of course impedes their physical and intellectual development and thus future progress. Now those kids can eat a well-balanced meal. How they love to come to school each day!

As you may remember, a student in one of those schools recently won a contest in mathematics skills. He became the champion of all of Yucatan and went on to Mexico City to participate in the national finals. We would like to think that we had a hand in his success.



I can't forget the precious words of Jesus, "I was hungry and you fed me ..." I could hear him say that day very clearly, "I could not see to sew, and you gave me sight. I was hungry, and you gave me food." It is such a rewarding experience and it will be good come the Last Judgment.

Carolyn first traveled to Merida with the Lemkes in 2006. From the very first day, she wanted to be more involved. She began by observing, then distributing rosaries, then helping Dorothy find the glasses she needed and finally fitting glasses herself. She offers a little different perspective.

SEEING WITH NEW EYES...

There are moments in life that linger happily in my heart's memory. He was a small Mayan man, 92 years old and his face deeply creased by the wrinkles of time. His filmy, bloodshot eyes told me of his near blindness.

After several different pairs of glasses of different strengths, I took a leap and tried a thick lens labeled a +7.45. Suddenly his face lit up with a smile, and I could tell by the way he gazed at the buildings in the public square and the clouds in the sky that this was a good fit. "It is clear; I can see" he simply said in delight and thanked me with a heartfelt handshake. Many times a similar scenario is repeated. It is exhilarating and beautiful.



In this spirit-led, trial and error fitting of glasses, I am conscious not only of the right “prescription” lenses for each person but also the appropriate style. It always makes me smile when a woman will scan the table of eyeglasses and choose a classy frame—though way off the mark in strength. I think about all the choices at our fingertips and try to honor their sense of pride and fashion.

In the space of four days, we helped about 750 men, women and children see more clearly with new lenses. Their gratitude flowed like a joyful spring: “Muchas Gracias! “Dios te bendiga! (God bless you) Perfecto! Often there were hugs, even kisses on the cheek. But there is much more to this Merida journey than physical sight.



The presence of these Mayan villagers gifts us more richly than the glasses we offer. It has often been said, “The eyes have it.” They are windows to the soul. To look into the eyes of these people is to see the struggles of poverty and isolation; it is also to catch a glimpse of their goodness, humility and joy. To be with them is to share their generous sense of community.

*As the 92-year-old man departed, I thought about what it must feel like to be surprised into seeing clearly what had been for years blurred or totally missed. It is like opening into a new world—surely a cause for celebration. We have this opportunity each day--: to see with new eyes the gift of another person, the call to compassion or forgiveness, the beauty of single flower. There are miracles of grace all around us—“only the beholders wanting. “
*Renew our vision, Lord.**

We don’t know what we’ll do next time for an encore, but we hope you enjoyed these reflections.

As Fr. Fred mentioned, our major expense is not the glasses, but feeding the kids. We have agreed to take on some new, very small schools. By small, we mean 14 students in a kindergarten in Kinchil, 12 in a kindergarten in Sacche, 16 in the elementary school in Sacche, and 33 kids in the kindergarten in Ochil. A former principal of our partner school in Eknakan asked us if we could feed 26 students at her new school in Petectunich. These are all smaller than our existing seven sites, but we have found that the smaller the village, the poorer the population. We have no doubt that these kids desperately need our help.



We need to purchase a refrigerator, current regulator, stove, and two propane tanks for the Sacche site. Those items, plus delivery and installation will cost us about \$600.00. The cost of the food for the meals and these new sites will run about \$.60 per day per child. Perhaps you or someone you know would like to help with the equipment we need or sponsor one of the schools.

Another expense looming on the horizon is a different vehicle for Luis to use to supply what will soon be 11 different locations. The Honda CR-V that he drives now is twelve years old and starting to have some issues. Our concern is that, if the vehicle has to go in for any major problem, we will not only have that additional expense, but the food won't be delivered.

We are relying on you. We accepted these extra schools because we knew our supporters would want to help these young students. A gift in any amount will be appreciated.

Sincerely,

Fr. Fred Elskamp

Carolyn Saucier

Mark Saucier