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October 2020 Newsletter

Dear Friends,

It has been far too long without a letter. Since a trip to Merida in March, we have dealt with the pandemic, the death of our co-founder, and school closings with an almost impenetrable lockdown in Mexico.

In the spring, we put off our letter thinking that people had enough on their table with the Covid-19 crisis. As we talked about it, we wanted to include a tribute to Dorothy who died a year ago last May. However, the crisis lingered, May turned in June and June into July, and then we were confronted with the unexpected death of Rudy. We'd like to begin with some reminiscing about this man who was so instrumental in bringing to life Dorothy's vision of ongoing care to the poor of Merida and the Yucatan state.

Board member Pat Joyce traveled to Merida with Rudy and Dorothy in 2015. She was hooked immediately and soon found herself on the foundation board, meeting with Rudy and others on a weekly basis.

I called those meetings "Wednesdays with Rudy." Rudy was the one who would keep us on track. He always wanted to ensure that our funds were spent correctly. Even when he was no longer traveling to Merida himself, he pushed us to plan, schedule, and prepare glasses well in advance. At one meeting, Rudy had just fallen while getting his mail on a cold November day. He had pretty serious injuries but managed to pull himself back into the house and tend to his bruises and wounds. When I expressed surprise at his ability to do that, Rudy replied, 'What else would I have done?' That moment epitomized Rudy. He moved forward no matter what, stayed on track. He was not afraid of suffering and had a humble, but absolute belief that, with the Lord's help, he could take care of himself. Dorothy's vision and Rudy's determination will keep the Merida Foundation going strong.

Greg Mihalevich, secretary of the board, also remembers "Rudy in charge." *I was fortunate to have made four trips to Merida with Rudy. These trips were easy for me since Rudy always took care of everything. He carefully packed and labeled the eyeglasses we brought with us and when we got to a village, he took charge of setting up the table to make Dorothy's search for the right pair of glasses as easy as possible. When the lines got too long, Rudy would have Luis send the folks just needing a pair of reading glasses to him to fit so that Dorothy could concentrate on the people with more demanding vision needs. He would keep an eye on Dorothy and when he saw that she was out of energy from hours of fitting glasses he would call it*



a day with a simple "it's time to go" command and begin packing up to leave. During my first trip in 2008 Rudy suddenly slumped over in his chair and was very pale. We hurried him to the nearest clinic which, fortunately, was only 4 or 5 blocks away. It turns out that Rudy had gotten severely dehydrated and after a saline solution IV he was feeling much better. We came back the next day and took up where we left off with Rudy in the lead.

Board member Larry Lewis recalls his first trip with Rudy and Dorothy.

When I went to Merida the first time he made sure we were taken care of. We had to get up early to go to the restaurant down the street for coffee. After that, it was breakfast back at the hotel and off to the villages to distribute glasses. He had his system to set up and get the glasses arranged for Dorothy. She knew she could count on him to organize everything, so she started fitting people even before he had everything out. When it was time to end the day, Rudy was packing up glasses while Dorothy was still working. She didn't quit until Rudy had bagged all of the glasses and told everyone, "We'll be back tomorrow." When we left the village, we always stopped for a cold refreshing drink to get us back to Merida. Rudy had his favorite stops for lunch when we would return to Merida, usually 2:30 or 3:00 in the afternoon. After a short rest, we would always gather in Rudy and Dorothy's room to visit and share our stories of the people we had met that day. The more I got to know more Rudy, the more I looked upon him as a saint living among us. Our friendship made me a better person. He is still my saint!

Luis Franco, our staff person in Merida, worked with Dorothy for decades and met Rudy on his first trip to Mexico to see what Dorothy was so excited about.

In the beginning, we delivered and fit eyeglasses in the Mayan villages surrounding the City of Merida, and also fixed the roofs of the Mayan homes that were made of sticks and tar paper that had been destroyed by the hurricanes. Later, we started providing food for children in the Mayan schools. The Yucatan is one of the areas in the country of Mexico with the highest malnutrition rate among children. There were even scholarships for young and brilliant children. And there was Rudy. He was, from the first moment, moved by the poverty of these people. He talked Dorothy into turning her once a year visit into three times a year. It was a great blessing for my people and for me personally. "I'll be coming as long as the good Lord allows me to," Rudy used to say. And the good Lord let him do it for nearly 20 years. When I was notified of Rudy's death, Father Fred, a very good friend of Rudy's, wrote to me of Rudy: "...he served mankind." Yes, Father Fred and I witnessed Rudy's service to humankind many times and for many years. I have encouraged the children we feed to follow the "Lemke way": to be generous, to be accurate and precise in everyday facts, and to be humble servants of God.



Genny Castro was a child when Dorothy first took her under her wing. Rudy shared Dorothy's love and kindness for Genny, and Genny was soon referring to him as her "abuelo." Upon his death, she wrote:

Dear grandpa Rudy. Today is a very sad day for us, but very good for you, since you are already resting close to



God. In you I found great strength and an example to follow with a heart full of kindness!!! I remember your visits to Merida to help people, and how hard you worked together with my granny Dorothy. Today you both rest in peace. I am eternally grateful to God for giving me the opportunity to meet you and the faith to prepare me to move on. I hope God gives me a long life to achieve the kind of life you taught me. I hope that you, from heaven, feel proud of me. You will always live in my heart, even as God has you in his holy glory. Rest in peace Grandfather Rudy. Your loving granddaughter, Genny.

To understand Rudy's relationship to Merida, you would have had to see him with the kids. As you can tell, Rudy was all business when in Mexico. They were there to distribute glasses and that was the focus of each day. He didn't like it when the schedule had to be changed in order to visit one of the schools before starting with the glasses. Well, he didn't like it until we got to the school and the kids surrounded him and Dorothy, all talking at once. You could tell from the beaming smile – yes, beaming! – and the affection in his eyes just how much he cared for every child that the foundation was feeding. We will miss him immensely, just as we still do Dorothy, but we are committed to maintaining and expanding their work in Merida and Yucatan state.



As we mentioned, the last trip we were able to take before the shutdown was in March. Greg Mihalevich wrote a report on that experience and, months later, we feel it is important to share it with you.

As most of you know, three times a year we travel to Merida, Mexico, to distribute eyeglasses to the people living in the villages. Each time we take 1,040 pairs of glasses with us. That's a lot of glasses, but why 1,040? Some time ago Rudy determined that this was maximum number that could be packed into two large suitcases so that each suitcase weighed just under 50 pounds. Any heavier than that and the airlines tack on a hefty penalty for overweight luggage, plus it gets pretty tough to lug around.

All of the glasses we take are donated. We get most of them from the Columbia, Missouri-based Festival of Sharing (www.FestivalofSharing.org). *"The Festival of Sharing is a cooperative response to world hunger, poverty and injustice."* *"Our goal is to promote and support projects and programs by providing funding and resource goods."* We also get glasses from the Lions Club as well as from individuals. Thanks!



The Merida Foundation has a lensometer which is a machine that allows us to read the prescription of each pair of glasses. The lenses are either pluses (for farsighted people) or minuses (for the nearsighted). We record the prescription on a small adhesive label and attach it to the lens. We bag the plus and minus glasses separately to make finding the right pair easier once we get to a village. Some glasses we get are pretty dirty or need some maintenance in order to be usable. As we grade the glasses we clean, replace missing nose pads, tighten tiny screws or straighten frames as needed. We take turns using the lensometer between trips and spend many hours getting the glasses graded and ready to go. It is

amazing to think that Dorothy did all this by herself for many years.

Our latest Merida adventure was Wednesday, March 11th to the 16th and our team included Anne Scott, Greg & Lois Mihalevich, and our friend Martha Fuhrman. We planned our first day to be a weekday because we wanted to visit the two schools that are the newest additions to our nutrition program. Thursday morning Luis

drove us to Sabacché about thirty miles southeast of Merida to a daycare/preschool where we provide a daily school lunch for thirty 3 to 6-year-old children. Some of the moms were preparing empanadas for the meal when we got there.

Just down the road we stopped at the grade school in town that also benefits from Luis's food deliveries. The one-room school has a current enrollment of 15 students in grades 1 through 6. The students were very well behaved and spoke a little English to us. The teacher was obviously doing a good job. A couple of our group visited the school's baño (bathroom) and gave it a grade of A+ for cleanliness. After our school visits we set up and gave out glasses and distributed about 30 or so pairs in this small village.

Luis is currently looking for 3 additional schools to add to the nutrition program.



Anne returned to the U.S. on Friday and Sandro Castro (Genny's brother) went with us to give out glasses in another small village called Abalá that day. We were off to a slow start, but the last two days we were at larger towns of Bokobá and Cacalchén and we ended up providing over 650 folks with glasses. Notable were five school kids that couldn't have been more than 10 or 11 years old. Each showed up in line without glasses, but ended up taking home very strong prescriptions in the +300 range! I don't know how they got along with vision like that. Thanks to your help they can see clearly now.

The situation today.

Mexico was hit hard by the corona virus. The country has had almost 800,000 cases and close to 82,000 deaths. Yucatán state had one of the lowest death numbers of the 32 Mexican states with 1,640 deaths. You can compare this to 2,253 deaths to date in Missouri, but Yucatán has almost 4 million fewer residents than Missouri. Still people attribute the relative success against Covid to the way the state quarantined, even sequestering villages from all but essential travelers.

In July they announced that the 2020-2021 school year would be held online and over radio and television for those without online access. This may change if there is a vaccine, but now students are not physically going to school and so they are not getting our daily meals. We are looking into alternative ways of getting food to them if this situation continues. One bright spot is that November 1, flights between Houston and Merida will be flying for the first time since the end of March. As soon as it is safe we will travel to Merida to distribute glasses and determine how we can get food to the kids who need it now more than ever.

Please know that we are very grateful for your support and ask that you continue to keep us on both your prayer and contribution lists.

The Merida Foundation Board