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Dear Friends,

We can't begin to tell you how great it feels to be able to write to you once again about a trip to Merida. We just returned before Thanksgiving from our first trip in two years because of COVID.

While Greg and Larry went down in June, they weren't yet able to go out to the villages to do glasses. The last time anyone distributed glasses was February of 2020, right before travel ceased and everyone went into lockdown. Normally, members of the Merida Foundation team travel to Mexico three times a year, serving anywhere from 500-700 people each trip. COVID eliminated four of those trips, depriving more than 2,000 Mayan villagers of glasses.

Departing Missouri, we did not know what to expect, but we crammed 1,040 pairs of glasses into two suitcases in the hopes that we would be able to use at least some of them. As it turned out, the state of Yucatan went to "green" just days before we arrived. Masks were still required everywhere, but the villages were open and businesses began the long path back to normal.

On our first day, Luis took us to the town of Ekmul, located about an hour's drive east of Merida. Ekmul has a population of a little over 2,300 inhabitants, but we would not have guessed it when we first arrived. There were two or three vendors in the plaza, with an equal number of shoppers. About 20 tricycle taxis, were parked by the side of the church, with the drivers sitting around, waiting on fares that didn't look like they were going to show

It took some time to find the appropriate official who could give us permission to set up shop outside the municipal building, but once we got it, the local police were very helpful in getting us a table and chairs, as well as getting out the word to villagers about our presence in town.



After a hiatus of years, we wondered if we would remember all the things that Dorothy had taught us about fitting people with glasses. We need not have worried, because within minutes, we were back in the groove, asking people their age and their vision needs and then picking through our inventory to find just the right glasses for them.

It seemed strange at first, everyone masked and their voices a little muffled because of it. But this practice had worked well for them. With a lockdown that would have been difficult here, the state of Yucatan had one of the lowest rates of COVID infection and death in the country. Of 294,000 COVID-related deaths in Mexico, less than 5,700 occurred in Yucatan.

As we started giving out glasses, it wasn't just the masks that reminded us that we were working in a different reality. One of the first people through the line, a Mayan woman in her 70s, gave us a fist bump while thanking us for her glasses. In years past, she would have shaken everyone's hand or hugged us.

Speaking of the line, that was different, too. Setting up in that near-empty plaza, we questioned whether we would have any takers that day. But before we got all the glasses organized on the table, one person showed up, and then another, and then another. The odd thing was that we never had more than eight or ten people in line, but there was always at least five or six there with no break until we packed up in mid-afternoon.



Our legs were tired after four hours of fitting the villagers for glasses, but our spirits never lagged. The grateful hearts of the people and smiles in their eyes sustained us. One man looked up in surprise to the heavens with his new 450 power bifocals and joyfully exclaimed “It is clear.” Another elderly woman whom we finally fitted with 600 power lenses simply said, “This is it!” and spontaneously offered hugs. The people made us laugh too. One man looked at Carolyn with his new glasses and said “you are beautiful”; Mark quickly responded “she is already taken.”

The next day, Sandro, the young man you met in our last newsletter who is now working for us part-time, joined us after missing the first day because of a scheduled COVID shot. People were waiting for us when we arrived in Ekmul and we quickly had two lines. Carolyn had one and Sandro the other. Mark helped them find the appropriate glasses, and Luis took some of the more difficult cases.

Once again, the line was never that long, but it never dwindled either. We probably served over 200 people that day, including many school-aged children. Once again, it was mid-afternoon before we could come up for air. By then, we had few glasses left and most everyone who came looking for help got it.

On Sunday, the four of us traveled to Bokobá, a tiny pueblo a few miles beyond Ekmul. These small remote villages in Yucatan are often the poorest, with few resources. Anyone who comes out to help them is welcomed with open arms, as we were. They quickly found us a table, put out the word, and we soon had people from age seven to seventy-something in our line.



Luis had scheduled school visits for us on Monday and Tuesday. We began early Monday morning with a visit to Sam’s Club. Luis quickly guided us around the store, directing us as we loaded a flat cart with eggs, cheese, meats, and other sundry child-tested foods.

Our first stop was Xcanchacan. Mothers met us to unload the food and then we met the principal Seydi Celis Cruz. We’ve found that most of the principals are caring and dynamic leaders, but Seydi takes this to a new level.



Seydi told us that, beginning in January, the government will be giving her a small weekly food package that includes chicken, tuna, and soya. It is not enough to feed her students, especially since they don’t like tuna or soya, but by supplementing with food that we supply and collecting money to buy some locally, she is convinced that she can give her children a hot daily meal.

Asked what she needs, she said, “just a large cooking pot and a table.” After months of persistence, she got a government grant to repurpose a room as a kitchen, but with nothing to cook food in or any place to serve. We told her to price what she needs and give us a budget.

This fall, while the schools reopened, parents had the option of sending their children to school or keeping them at home for remote learning. About half of Seydi's students come to school, but she hopes that this will change come January.

In Sabache, principal Ada Luz Uc Canché is in a somewhat different situation. She, too, is working under the present government plan. Her students attend two mornings a week, one groups Monday and Wednesday, and the other Tuesday and Thursday. The students are in class from 8:00 until 11:30 and are then sent home with a lunch we provide.

Ada Luz is not only the principal, but the only teacher. All her students are in one classroom. She has another room, but it is filled with storage. She would like to clean it up and buy a propane stove so that food doesn't have to be cooked at a neighbor's house. We invited her to put together a budget and give it to Luis.

It was pretty much the same at the school Petectenich, which we visited later that day, and the schools in Telchiquillo and Pixyah, which we visited Tuesday. It was the poverty of the schools that left the deepest impression. One school in particular was located in a desolate area, where the only color was a pink magnolia bush. There was no playground equipment except an abandoned truck tire—not even a soccer ball. Overused and tattered workbooks cluttered the single bookshelf. When we asked the principal what she needed, her response was “everything but especially some library books for the children.” With the reduced hours and minimal supplies, one wonders how far behind the children are in their learning.



Our last newsletter introduced you to Seidy Gutiérrez Cisneros. She is a nutrition graduate who lives in Mérida Yucatán. She joined us on our Tuesday visits. She is 27 and has worked in community projects, especially research projects and in a foundation that cares for people with cancer. She also has some experience working with children.



Currently she is dedicated to private practice but loves working in communities, promoting nutrition to improve health, from disease prevention and the adoption of good habits. She genuinely believes that the best age to talk about nutrition is early childhood and that if done right children can be agents of change in their own homes, and thus little by little improve our communities.

We plan to use Seidy as a consultant. As we add new schools and face the different food situations at our existing schools, we hope to send Seidy out to principals about what they can do with the food they're getting from the government and how we might best supplement it. She will also offer to talk to parents about nutrition if the principal sees a need. With all this in mind, we are as excited as the principals about a new beginning in the New Year.

After we finished with the schools on Tuesday, we spent the afternoon giving out glasses in Pixyah. Like its school, the town is very poor. It doesn't have a plaza, a church, or a municipal building. When we told the local tienda owner what we wanted to do, she invited us to set up in front of her store. She offered us a large folding table and even treated us to Cokes and water.

Out of nowhere, people just seemed to appear – more than we'd thought lived in the town. These were the really needy. They were very patient as, with now a limited supply of glasses, it was harder to find something that would

work for each one. Using low minus bifocals for reader, and with a lot of luck we were able to give glasses to everyone who stood in line. And like our shopkeeper host, they were very grateful that we came to their village.



The Merida Foundation depends on a lot of people doing a lot of behind-the-scenes work. One of those is Marcella Zellner of Fayette, MO. We get a lot of our glasses from the Festival of Sharing, an annual, ecumenical event sponsored by the Missouri Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Marcella is their “glasses lady.” She gathers donated glasses from churches across the state, removes the cases (which we don’t use) for Goodwill, sorts and counts the glasses. At 81, with her husband suffering from Alzheimer’s, she was asked if she wanted to step back. She kindly rejected the offer, explaining that this work kept her grounded and connected with the poor. (The picture of Marcella is from a few years ago taken by the Sedalia Democrat when the Festival of Sharing was still collecting at the state fairgrounds.)

On a sad note, we acknowledge the death of the parents of Luis. Luis’ father died in September and his mother followed her husband in November. They were friends of Dorothy long before Rudy or the Merida Foundation came into the picture. We met them on our very first visit to Merida when they invited us to their house for lunch. Luis, the oldest of their children, was very close to them. They were elderly and in failing health, but that doesn’t lighten the grief at their loss. Please keep Luis and his family in your prayers.

As Christmas approaches, please try to find a place for the Merida Foundation under your tree. There are a lot of charities asking for your help this season, but you won’t find any where your gift will be better spent. Your contribution will help us feed hundreds of kids each school day next year, and fit thousands of rural indigenous people with glasses.

We have big plans for next year. We want to add at least 2 more schools, provide each school partner with a small grant to purchase pots, books, equipment, more food or whatever they need to provide a better learning environment for their kids. We are also looking at funding some scholarships to encourage promising students to continue their education. Please consider being a part of this with a generous gift.

Thank you for all that you have already done for the people served by the Merida Foundation. May your Christmas echo the joy of that stable Birth and may your New Year be filled with hope!

All of us at the Merida Foundation wish you a very Merry Christmas.

Mark and Carolyn Saucier
For the Merida Foundation Board

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