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February 2023 Newsletter

Dear Friends,

Keeping Dorothy's mission of delivering discarded glasses, the group fitted 900 glasses on the latest trip from February 7-14, 2023. Most importantly, the joy that the youngest and the oldest experienced by being able to see was a privilege for all of us who were able to go. On our first day of fitting glasses in Cuzamá, one of Sandro's and Genny's neighbors remembered the first time that Dorothy had fitted her with glasses. She thought one of the team was still Dorothy. This was the town where there is a plaque to Sam Bower, Dorothy's first husband, for his contribution to the ministry that continues to this day. Dorothy's impact can be felt throughout the Yucatan in the many villages where glasses have been delivered over 45 years. On many trips someone will bring their old glasses from Dorothy to exchange them for a newer pair that will help them see better.

Two members of the executive staff of the Diocese of Jefferson City accompanied us on the trip. Deacon Enrique Castro, Director of Hispanic Ministries, and Director Jake Seifert of the Development and Missions division, went with us to the existing schools, new schools, Escuela Hogar, Emmanuel and the villages where glasses were fitted. They were able to see that the ministry that started with the inspiration of doing one act of kindness for a neighbor could be translated into over 600 children being fed daily and thousands being able to see clearly. While Deacon Castro and Jake both support many ministries both in Missouri and abroad, this trip connected them with the direct impact of the Merida Foundation that you so generously support.



In the first village that we delivered glasses, Deacon Castro jumped right in to learn how to fit glasses. Four lines were formed and we worked for over 4 hours to fit the glasses to almost 400 people. One 9-year-old could not see the school blackboard. Deacon Castro was able to fit him with a pair of glasses that made everything clear. He looked in amazement and pointed out the leaves on the trees to his mother. Later that day, his mother brought his brother and we were able to change his life as well. There were several seniors that came in wheelchairs with their families to see if they could resume

sewing and reading. One lady was so delighted that her excitement was contagious for her three granddaughters who brought her. The team took special care with the seniors so that they would not have to wait too long. In addition to glasses, Jake handed out rosaries from the mission office. Sunglasses were a big hit as well. All of the police department were outfitted with some sunglasses.

Throughout the week, we delivered the food with Sandro and Seidy, who became a full-time employee on February 1. The principals greeted us with enthusiasm and were grateful for the food that was brought on a weekly basis to each of the schools. In many of the schools the mothers volunteer to prepare the food so that the children of the village receive a nutritious meal before they go home at



11:00 am. This helps to stretch the food budget for the entire family. With weekly deliveries the food is fresher and there is more variety in the menus. The downside is that the costs of gas. The board is dedicated to finding the money to continue the weekly deliveries. Both Sandro and Seidy will be looking to supplement the food that is purchased in Merida with locally grown food to support the villages where the schools are.

With Seidy on staff full time, she will be able to assist the principals and cooks to make sure that the food that is served is as nutritious as possible. Most of the children in the schools are 7 and

younger and need as much nutrition to ensure that their brains continue to grow to their maximum potential. The government of Mexico has mandated that the schools provide nutrition classes even for the preschools. Seidy has been asked to teach those classes for one school and will probably be teaching at the other schools. Seidy will be offering classes at the schools for the parents to help them provide the most nutritious meals within their budgets. So many opportunities have opened up with the addition of Seidy to impact the students and their families that we are able to support.

Four new schools were identified by Sandro for participation in the nutrition program. All four schools were visited by board members, Larry Lewis and Greg Mihalevich, to explain the program and examine the sites where the food would be prepared. Three of the four schools were ready to start receiving food that week. The other school needed to do some minor repairs to the kitchen before they could join. All of the principals were excited to have nutritious food for their children. The addition of 102 students will bring to the total to over 700 students. More money and resources will be dedicated to these children. The board has worked to increase the number of students so that more families and children can reap the benefits of this program and believes that the donors will continue to support these new schools and children.

The board has also allocated some funds for some improvements to the schools. Some of the schools needed to update their overhead projectors or add video monitors. Other schools were



improving their playgrounds with fundraising in the community. The mission team was able to view all of the improvements and able to report that the monies were being used to boost the learning environment of the schools. With your continued support Merida Foundation will continue to provide funds for the schools that we are serving.



No visit to Merida is ever complete without a stop at Emmanuel. Gabby started by providing food in the neighborhood park more than twenty years ago. She currently feeds 67 students and 42 senior citizens at her site. The team visited while the children and the seniors after the meal had been finished. Some of the students were finishing their homework and the seniors were enjoying being

around the children. The cooks were busy preparing some food for the students that come in later. Both cooks have worked at Emmanuel for over 15 years. They said “See you later”, confident that they could count on our support. Gabby showed us the roof that had been repaired by the Merida Foundation. Larry provided her with additional funds for a water project. Gabby receives \$500.00 each month from the foundation to assist her with the meal program. Truly, the foundation is blessed to be able to support Emmanuel.



A top priority of the team was to visit Escuela Hogar. Father Antonio and Jaime Garza, the administrator, greeted us and explained the school to Deacon Castro and Jake. Currently, there are 40 boys that attend the boarding school. Some of the boys are orphans and others come from the villages.



Their parents see an opportunity for their sons to receive a religious upbringing, an excellent education and a safe environment where they will always have meals. All of the boys are currently learning English and the older boys were able to speak in full sentences. Some of us tried our best with our limited Spanish. Deacon Castro and Jaime Schulte were able to converse with the students. Father Antonio and Jaime took us on a tour of the school. The first stop was the

computer lab. The foundation had provided computers, desks, air conditioners and shades for the lab last summer. The community provided funding as well.

On the roof top next to the lab was the electrical transformer that Rudy and Dorothy financed over twenty years ago. It is still operating. The last major improvement that we toured was the bathrooms and shower. Carlos Fernandez and Willy Diaz from Bepensa had arranged volunteers from the company to install dividers in the bathrooms for the boys. Jaime had indicated that this was the first priority for the school. Willy told us later that Bepensa would be buying new air conditioners for the school. If Larry and Greg had not met Willy last year when their flight was cancelled, these improvements would not have occurred. It was a miracle that provides resources to Escuela Hogar and enriches the employees of Bepensa by their generous contributions.



When Dorothy and Rudy started the nutrition program, they knew that the children were hungry and a good meal would help them in school. One of the first schools for the program was in Yaxkukul. The school has students through eighth grade. One of the students was struggling to pay attention in class and his parents were going through a divorce. When it was time to take a national test for math, he scored the highest in the state of Yucatan. The village came together and financed his trip to the national competition. He scored 3rd in the nation. He received a scholarship to high school and was soon spending most of the day commuting into Mérida. Through the foundation, transportation assistance was provided. Milton Pech is now a 3rd year student in mechanical engineering at the University of Yucatan in Mérida. Both Milton and his mom have

expressed gratitude for the nutrition program and transportation assistance. The nutrition program provided a meal when it was very difficult for his mother to feed her son. The programs transformed his life and that of his family.



As you can tell from reading this newsletter we have shifted into a higher gear as we continue to do our best to meet the basic needs including sight, nutrition, and education of the people in and around Mérida. We are constantly aware that we are able to do this work due to your support. Thank you.

Patricia Joyce
For the Merida Foundation Board

Founders: Dorothy & Rudy Lemke