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June 2023 Newsletter

Dear Friends,

Loaded with glasses and well wishes, we traveled to Merida. The day we arrived it was, as Dan Rather would say, "Hotter than a blister bug in a pepper patch." It was 104 degrees! May is the hottest month in Merida -- a high bar considering the average temp is 85.

Of course, the people we were visiting, especially out in the Mayan villages, live in these conditions, day-in and day-out, with no relief from air conditioning. For centuries, they have managed the heat with light fabrics, high-ceilinged architecture, houses of stone or cement block, and airy hammocks for sleeping. They also spend a lot of time outdoors, especially in the evenings.

The people of Merida enjoy being in the company of one another. We see this as villagers wait patiently in lines for glasses, passing the time visiting and laughing. We see it too in the schools, in the almost family-like relationships of principals and teachers to their students.

Escuela Hogar



We saw it the first morning when we met with Fr. Victor and the staff of Escuela Hogar in Merida. This big man with a cane who had just served as superior of his entire community, interacted so lovingly with these emotionally frail kids coming from poverty, abuse, and neglect. They flocked to him.

Fr. Victor is assisted by Fr. Antonio, an energetic priest still young enough to play soccer with the kids and Jaime, a lay volunteer. The three of them have a grand vision for the school. They want to continue to serve boys from troubled homes, but they want to provide an education on par with the good private schools in Merida. They hope to increase enrollment to 50 students next year and eventually double that.

While we were there, workers were remodeling a classroom to turn it into a chemistry lab. When complete, it will be home to the pile of lab equipment donated by another foundation.

Operating on a shoestring budget for so long, the facility is in dire need of repairs. They need to repair or replace the transformer that Dorothy and Rudy first donated years ago. They want to redo the dining room to make it more appealing to the kids and upgrade the kitchen where Seidy has been working with the cook to upgrade nutrition.

We will continue our monthly support and give a little more help when we can but a lot of this is beyond our current means. What we hope to do is facilitate connections with other groups that can take on individual projects.

Miracles in the Mayan Villages

Imagine if you can a two to three room basic cement structure surrounded by concrete slabs and mounds of rock with a few tall grasses or lonely tree struggling to survive in the arid 100-degree days.



Perhaps there are a few swings, a slide or an old tire for creative games. Most likely there is another small building with a refrigerator, a single source of water and one or two burners for food preparation. These are the schools, but they're more like miracles in the Mayan villages.

We visited all nine schools where the Merida Foundation presently provides daily lunches for nearly 600 children. Amidst the poverty of materials and environment, there is an impressive and contagious spirit among the students and teachers. The children seem radiant with joy in their eyes and smiles that will win your heart. Some are shy but most circle around, willingly give hugs and seek attention.

We learned of their favorite subjects (often math) and their plans to be doctors, teachers, veterinarians and more. The future is full of promise—as the sign in one school garden read: “Planta tus sueños y dejalos crecer” (Plant your dreams and let them grow.)

These schools are community endeavors. Mother's Day was on May 10 and all the mothers wore crowns crafted by their children and enjoyed pizza and cupcakes together. The mothers are regular helpers—rotating in their preparation of the lunches and cleaning after hours. At several schools, the parents even planted gardens to raise vegetables and flowers or volunteered to help build canopies for sun protection. There always seems to be an artist in the community who enlivens the cement walls with colorful sea and land creatures.



Most impressive are the dedication and enthusiasm of the principals—motivations from the heart. They are the movers and shakers with a clear vision of high priority needs and improvements to the schools. Their requests include a canopy to shield from the intense heat, a new hose, a stove, playground equipment, an additional classroom, renovated bathrooms, books to set up a library, updated learning resources. With the help of the government, the Merida Foundation and the larger community, these principals are confident and deeply grateful.

We know that education can change lives and enrich communities. The Merida Foundation with its food and financial support is sowing seeds of a different future for young Mayan children.

The Eyes Have It

After visiting the schools, we did glasses for the remainder of each day. It is always a gift to distribute free eyeglasses to the people in these communities despite standing long hours in the 100+ degree weather. It is their gratitude that carries us—their hugs and blessings—not only for the “seeing with new eyes” but just for the visiting and listening to their stories.

We never had long lines, but we always had people waiting. At times they crowded around the table, and it got a little claustrophobic, especially with the heat, but that is just the way they are. They've never been able to afford the sense of personal space we have in this country.

There are always a few encounters doing the glasses that stand out. One elderly man lingered long—recounting that his wife had died 12 years ago, telling how his daughter was in a nearby village, but he lived alone and was often lonely. He ended with a warm embrace. Across cultures and languages so deep is the human connection.



In Acanceh, it was a middle-aged man who patiently helped his near deaf and wheelchair-bound find the glasses she needed. In Tecoh, there was a man who lost one eye in an accident and whose vision in the other made him functionally blind. We were blessed to have one pair of old “coke bottle” glasses that renewed his world.

On Mother's Day, we met Severina. She is the mother of seven, grandmother and great grandmother, but everyone in the community seemed to treat her as their honorary mother. She's 86, stands less than five feet, but straight as an arrow. When she got her glasses, she posed for pictures and then started invoking a blessing on each of us.



Seidy and Sandro have been going out and fitting glasses with us and have become quite good at it. We have accumulated a reserve of glasses in Merida and this summer, when they are not delivering food for schools, they are going to go out with the glasses themselves. You just got to love the initiative of these two. We talked about them in our last newsletter but this time we wanted to give them the chance to speak to you themselves.

Seidy



I started working full-time at the Mérida Foundation in February of this year. Since then, it has been an avalanche of blessings because I have been able to get to know the schools supported by the foundation better, each with its own story.

My work as a nutritionist has involved designing menus for the schools (including Escuela Hogar). I take into consideration that they should be suitable for the children's age, adapt the menus to any needs or eventualities, obtain the necessary supplies, and deliver them to their destination.

I have also worked on providing nutrition topics to the children, their mothers, and soon-to-be teachers. This is because a comprehensive approach is necessary to have a better impact on childhood and improve the chances of them making the most of their education.

In the recent visit of Mark and Carolyn, we accompanied them to deliver glasses to Ixil, Yaxkukul, Tecoh, and Acanceh, which are marginalized communities in the state of Yucatán. Each visit was unique because the soul of each village is different, and it is truly beautiful to see how people receive the glasses that will greatly help them in their daily tasks.

For example, embroidery is a common activity for women in these communities to generate income, and many of the women who received glasses had difficulty performing this activity, so the glasses will be of great assistance to them. Elderly men, men working in the fields, and students also received glasses. The most beautiful thing was the smile that appeared when they put on a pair of glasses and could see better with them.

I can say that it is a blessing to work at the Mérida Foundation and to help so many people in various ways. My commitment is to reach more and more people, providing support through glasses and nutritional education, which are essential for a healthy and happy life.

Sandro

I am writing this little letter to let you know that being part of this project has changed the way I see things about life. I used to think the most important things in life were to achieve personal success and then enjoy the results of that.

I've been working with the Merida Foundation for more than two years. I've seen how children, parents, teachers here in Mayan communities have better lives, thanks to the support of the foundation.

It's hard to describe the feeling I have when I see the hope in their faces when they receive the food or glasses. Or when people try to find a way to express their joy and gratitude and can only smile.

I guess those are the moments when I realize that I've learned that there are things even more important than personal success. I see the importance of kindness and the effects of your kindness in helping people who really need it. I understand we can't figure out all the problems of these villages, but I'm sure that your support is changing the children and parents in the communities.

I'm sure these experiences are teaching me the true sense of life. I want to thank you a lot for all the things you are doing for our communities and send you blessings too. Thank you and I hope to see some of you soon!



That's our trip, but whenever members of the Merida Foundation travel to Merida, we never go alone. We represent the entire board. We represent the Festival of Sharing of the Missouri Conference of the Methodist church and the Missouri Lions Clubs who supply our glasses. Most of all, we represent you and your generous kindness that allows us to help so many. We are grateful for all you have done and trust in your continued support.



Sincerely
Carolyn and Mark Saucier

Merida Foundation Board of Directors:

Anne Scott, Greg Mihalevich,
Larry Lewis, Patricia Joyce,
Jamie Schulte and Mark Saucier