

# A Change in Perspective

By Katie Love

When asked by friends, loved ones, and strangers how my trip to Managua, Nicaragua was, my answer was unequivocally, “It was amazing.” My doctor raised her eyebrows at this news, “Even with the GI infection?”

“Oh yes,” I responded. “We basically didn’t have AC for all ten days either.” The incredible part definitely was not the condition of the toilets—or, more accurately, holes—we used at clinic, nor was it the swarms of mosquitoes and flies that dive-bombed our PB and J’s. What made this trip amazing was that it changed my perspective of the world.

To be honest, I hadn’t done much research on Nicaragua before going on the SIGH (Students Interested in Global Health) trip. If I had, I would have known that Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere—the only poorer country is Haiti. I hadn’t expected the poverty we encountered. On our first full day, we went to “La Chureca,” which translates as “the Dump.” And it is just that, a garbage dump. The horrifying part is that people live there. Children live there. On our bus tour through the area, we saw a girl walking around the muddy street—if you could call it a street—barefoot. I found the saddest aspect of the situation in the Dump to be the fact that missionary groups routinely buy or build homes for families living there, and the families immediately must sell their houses and move back to the Dump. To me that indicates a serious problem with the economic and social structure in Nicaragua. Elizabeth, our hostess in Nicaragua, explained that people do this because they can make a daily wage at the Dump by sorting recyclables. Elsewhere in the country, payday is only two times per month, and the salary is not much.

We did clinic in three different villages: Los Cedros, Los Romeros, and Monte Fresco. About one hundred people from the community lined up to be seen. Many of the patients were clearly not sick, but they complained of general symptoms, such as headaches, fevers or a cold, so that they could have medications like Tylenol or cough drops available for when they really were ill. They were always grateful for any medication we provided. We did not have prescrip-

tion pain medications, but a man with severe back pain from a herniated disk was extremely glad to get Ibuprofen. His attitude contrasted greatly with the patients I had already encountered in my preceptorship. In the United States, a patient with that amount of pain likely would have laughed at the suggestion of Ibuprofen and then would have demanded something much stronger.

The patients evidently had a large amount of respect for health care providers. They came to our clinics, which were often outside, dressed very nicely even by American standards. They did not shuffle into the office in pajamas or sweatpants; instead, they wore some of their best clothes. Many girls, for example, wore beautiful floral dresses, which probably also functioned as their Easter dresses.

My favorite day of the trip was going out to the community for home visits. Women who were leaders in the church at Los Cedros took us in groups to see people whom they knew were sick, or had a chronic illness, but could not make the trip to clinic. Sometimes the people would invite us into their homes, and we saw how they lived. Again, their gratitude was very evident: when we left, some women even hugged or kissed us goodbye.

There was clear disparity in the community’s wealth. We went to one home that had tile flooring and a porch, while other homes had dirt floors and aluminum walls. One man met us in the street while we were doing home visits. He was having severe abdominal pain and vomiting, and a portion of his abdomen was distended. We indicated that we needed to perform an abdominal exam and that we needed a place for him to lie down. He said that we could go to his home, so we followed him as he hurried ahead to straighten his bed. We eventually saw that his house consisted of aluminum walls, a dirt floor, and two pieces of furniture—a neat bed and a desk. Even riding around in our bus, we could see the poverty in Nicaragua. Trash littered the roads. Unneutered, underfed dogs roamed around. The bumpy roads were severely in need of pavement. An interesting sight in Managua was that, even in June, Christmas decorations were up, a remnant



Amy Hillard



of a Christmas celebration two and a half years prior. The government did not even have money to pay workers to take down Christmas decorations. Still, the lights were turned on every night.

My heart truly goes out to the people of Nicaragua who live in poverty. Since returning from the trip, I have found myself extremely grateful for the basics; forget luxuries like a television or computer. I will never complain about being hot again. I have readily accessible air conditioning in my apartment and in my car—I can deal with Florida heat. I have all the water I could ever want, and it’s clean. I have an apartment with insulated walls, carpet, and furniture. I eat three meals a day minimum. Now, when I think I’m having a bad day, I remind myself of these things. I also feel extremely fortunate that I have been blessed with so many wonderful educational opportunities. I might flatter myself by thinking I’ve gotten this far solely because of the effort I put into getting to medical school, but I would never have

made it to medical school if my parents had pulled me out of school when I was ten years old to work because we didn’t have enough food.

In addition to gratitude, I also feel a renewed responsibility to help people who weren’t born into the luxury that I was. The unfortunate part about medical mission trips is that the volunteers only treat the symptoms of the real problems a country is facing. As someone who has chosen a career in healing, that frustrates me. Social and economic issues cause poverty. Providing people with basic medical care is like putting a small Band-Aid over a cut that has already progressed to a systemic infection. Nevertheless, I want to continue doing outreach to third world countries, because even if I’m not changing the problems, I am helping to alleviate suffering. And the gratitude of the people we saw showed me that even if we can’t generate the radical change I would like to see, we are making a positive impact.