



Labor of Love

beyond the border

by: Bruce Bosler D.D.S.

It had been decades since I last saw Lee. Not since high school. I knew he was a dentist in Seattle, but that's about all. Imagine my surprise when he called me out of the blue and invited me to go to Mexico with him to give dental care to the poor.

I was onboard from the start. I asked my daughter, Kaitlin, to come with me to assist. Our excitement of the impending adventure was overshadowed by the news reports of the drug cartel violence in the border cities. The U.S. State Department advised against travel there and all my friends asked if I had heard the news on TV. Even the U.S. military had recently declared Mexico off limits to all military personnel.

We arrived by plane in El Paso, Texas, and then joined several other doctors in a large passenger van. It was great to see Lee again and meet the other participants and feel the generated excitement about our trip. But the lighthearted banter quieted as we approached the Mexican border. It was clear that even our host himself who held dual U.S./Mexican citizenship felt unsure of what to expect at the border crossing.

"Don't offer any information and speak only if questioned. Keep a low profile," we were cautioned.

Four dentists and eight support personnel made up our humanitarian team. We were headed for Neuvo

Casas Grandes, a small Mexican town about 100 miles south of the border, to provide dental services at a school for handicapped children. In our bags were dental instruments and boxes of local anesthetics labeled, lidocaine, septocaine and carbocaine...words that sound all too similar to "cocaine". Any machine gun toting border guard who was not familiar with dental anesthetics, could easily complicate our lives in a real hurry.

Fortunately, we made it past not only the border guards but a military check point as well without incident. It was free sailing the rest of the way across the high desert in this sparsely populated northwestern corner of the state of Chihuahua, Mexico.

The dental clinic at the "LaGaviota" school has four dental chairs and is surprisingly well stocked with supplies. Teams of dentists like ours visit from the U.S. about once a month donating supplies and equipment as they come. Other medical services include optometry and a surgical suite for cleft lip and club foot procedures.

We were scheduled to see patients Thursday and Friday. Each were 10 hour days. We had translators available but often Kaitlin and I tried out what little Spanish we already knew. Kaitlin kept busy sterilizing instruments and assisting me with the patients.

Our favorite little patient was Esmeralda who was

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nine years old with big brown eyes. She asked if we could make her two front teeth pretty. Little Esmeralda had brown mottled enamel from extreme fluorosis caused by high levels of fluoride in the local well from which they got their drinking water. She held Kaitlin's hand for reassurance as her family members gathered around to watch me veneer her front teeth with composite bonding. When finished, we gave her a mirror and watched her face light up with joy at the first sight of her new white teeth. She said, "Thank you" in English and bolted out of the chair.

Most of the dental work we provided was extractions and fillings. Anything restorative like partials and bridges would have to be acquired elsewhere.

Our second day in the clinic was a surprise to me. The entire day was scheduled with Mennonite families. These families had lived here for generations. They are of European descent and speak Dutch. The men also speak Spanish and English.

Mennonite women and girls dress in 1800's period attire. Their dresses were long with long sleeves and high necklines. They don't wear make-up and they covered their heads with a bonnet. It was like they were in costume for a play – but it was no show. That's what they have worn for generations. Who would expect to find a community of Mennonites living for generations peacefully side-by-side with the locals in this thinly populated high desert of Mexico?

Imagine my additional surprise to learn that just 12 miles away is an old American Mormon colony founded in the late 1880's by polygamist Mormon families from Utah. Today it is called Colonia Juarez and polygamy is no longer practiced. These families still have strong ties with family in Arizona and Utah. Many prominent Mormon fami-



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lies have come from this tiny colony. One of the more widely known names is Mitt Romney, former governor of Massachusetts and former presidential candidate. His father, George Romney, also a former governor of Michigan, was born there.

Our host Ed and Gayle Whetton live there, too. They raised their large family of eight children in Colonia Juarez. Their youngest son, Timmy, was severely handicapped as a result of a herpetic viral infection at birth. Gayle and Ed adopted him and raised him as if he were their own. He had cerebral palsy and was micro cephalic. The doctors didn't expect him to live past age three especially in Mexico where there were no social services. Over time, Gayle discovered many families of similarly handicapped children. She started her own support group and eventually with five families, founded the APNMI center in 1993. Today it serves fifty handicapped children and twenty adults. The medical and dental services are available to the needy public.

The mission of the Association de Padres de Ninos Mentalmente Inhabilitados (APNMI) and it's affiliated school "La Gaviota" is to help persons with disabilities and their families face their challenges in a positive way through the cooperation and united efforts of families with similar challenges. It was established to provide a place where parents could find information and the necessary services for their children with disabilities.

Three years ago, Timmy passed away at age 17. He lived many years longer than expected due to the love of his family. Through the love and courage of those who knew him, sprang the ministry of "La Gaviota".

It was an honor to serve with these good people. I am grateful my daughter could meet them. We both agree we received far more than what we gave. I think I will go again.

While the news broadcasts the violent drug wars in the border towns of Mexico, not far away go the quiet daily efforts of those whose love and courage make a difference in the world one life at a time.

For more information on how you can share in this Labor of Love please contact gayle.whetten@gmail.com or www.laborofloveinmexico.blogspot.com ■

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