	PazSalud brigada de ojos agosto 2006 Surgical Eye Brigade August 2006 Lanetta Lundberg
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## Into the Light

On August 4, 2006 the PazSalud Surgical Eye Brigade was finally underway. For many of us the brigade was our first experience traveling to El Salvador. In preparation, we were hungry to learn and would search on line for any bit of information we could find about the country, geography, climate, people and government. Kathy Garcia had sent out orientation information and instructions. We reviewed and became familiar with the starting details like travel requirements, recommended items, what we could take and what to leave home. Our job in packing was to limit our personal items to one carry-on and reserve the checked space for the medical supplies. Mentally we were prepared and physically we squeezed everything we would need for the week into one carry-on suitcase, but it wasn't until we actually stepped foot in country that everything we had prepared for came to life. We were energized and ready to activate our mission.

El Salvador is located along the western coast of Central America just south of Guatemala and is about the size of Massachusetts or Los Angeles. The country is located 13° north of the equator lending to a very warm humid climate year around with the rainy season during the time of our brigade. We expected thunder storms nightly with

a heavy rain showers. Only one evening in Tierra Blanca brought a brief storm with heavy rain, otherwise it was hot, muggy and without any breeze. I have never visited a place that was so ambient. It felt like we were at a place in the world without moving weather. Early on Kathy told us the weather would be hot and we would be without hot water. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise. We all appreciated and grew fond of stepping into the cold showers. There was abundant water this time of year, so some took cold showers morning and night.

It didn't take long to be enlightened about the people and their living environment. The country is still feeling the effects of the civil war of the 1980's and the devastating earthquake in 2001. You could see hardship and strength in their eyes along with kindness and caring. Salvadorians are a believing people dedicated to the memory of Monsignor Oscar Romero. We were all impressed with feeling their commitment to a cause and passion of his presence. Monsignor Oscar Romero, who was murdered as he said mass in 1980, still has a dominate presence, is considered saintly and the people worship him in their daily lives. There was hardly a conversation without mention of the Lord/Jesus, or politica. – this leads their lives. They are an accepting people of hardship. They are also trusting and patient. It was noticeable and common to hear “Buena”, throughout the day, which was short for “Wishing you a good day”. We also heard often other greetings like “Diaz la bendiga” (have a good day) and “Adios Buena ” (with good bye).



The area we traveled was open, flat, green and lush agricultural land with volcanic mountains dotted in the distance. From the highway one could imagine opportunity for a good income and lifestyle. Not the case. Ninety percent of the men work long hours in the fields, mostly sugar cane, without much water – kidney disease and kidney failure is a common malady. Eye disease, especially cataracts is common. The work is there, but the hours are long and the annual income is very low.

For the most part, we noticed a very traditional subsistence lifestyle managing with basic needs.



It was common to observe in the early morning, when the rooster's crow, families beginning their day by chopping wood for cooking, washing clothes at the pila, women hanging the freshly washed clothes on the line as the day was dawning and children getting food from the bodega for the morning meal. At the same time there were men, women and young people, who had started their day much earlier, traveling the dirt road

in front of the Monsignor Romero Center by walking, riding bikes, on horseback, carts, in cars and in the back of small pick-up trucks.



Life seemed basic and rural, but every now and then a shiny new minivan would drive through or we would notice a satellite dish on a roof top or cable TV on in a one bedroom hut.

Mornings were the best time to get a sense of the community. It was also common and natural to see dogs, pigs and chickens milling up and down the road.



Very young children would pass by herding cows with nothing more than sticks. It was curious, but impressive how everything and everyone seemed to co-habitat. As our time in Tierra Blanca and Jiquilisco progressed, we realized that everyone was in the same boat; the people managed with very little, respected life and only took the life of a chicken or pig if needed for very special meal. It appeared everyone knew the owner of a chicken or pig and even though the animals were free to roam, only the owners harvested

their possession. There was no pantry to speak of – certainly not the luxury of a freezer. There didn't seem to be the urgency for large pantries, or stocks of food. Diets were very basic.

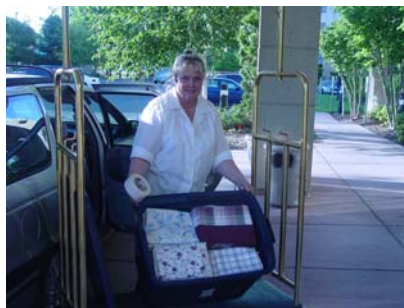
Dogs and cats were around, but the numbers were small and they were mostly undernourished. We could tell it was a hard life. We saw many vendors selling a popular fast food - papusas (either 2 tortillas or one tortilla folded in half with bean paste and cheese sealed inside, then heated on a hot plate or skillet). Occasionally, a vendor with a small cooler on a cart would pass by. It was a daily effort and kept the people very busy just to have shelter and put food on the table.

As we took a closer look traveling down the highway in Herman's (Ernon) very nice air-conditioned bus, we would see red/white/blue stripes painted on guardrails, sign posts, power poles, buildings, rocks, stairs to homes, and other random places. It was explained that there are two major controlling political parties, FMLN and AREANA. What we were seeing was the mark of the FMLN.

On to the Eye Brigade. Our team was gathered for a surgical eye brigade. The mission was to remove cataracts and replace with eye implants. Only the most severe cases could be done and only one eye per patient, even if there was a bi-lateral need. There was also a high incidence of untreatable toxoplasmosis, "eye of the cat" and untreatable glaucoma. Some of the patients that initially qualified as a candidate had a condition that excluded them from the list. It was disheartening for Blanca to translate to them there was nothing that could be done. How do you say no to a face like this?



For the brigade we needed to bring all supplies, including the bed sheets. Sr. Eleanor and Kathy did not find out about the lack of sheets until a few days before the brigade. As prayers would have it, the PeaceHealth System Office came to the rescue and gathered up 22 sets of twin sheets. Laura Trettevik saw to it that the sheets were delivered to our base in Seattle the night before our departure.



It was great to see the colorful outcome of the “sheet transplant”, and such a good feeling to leave the sheets behind in the hospital as a reminder of the time we spent there.

