

Nancy Tatnall's blog

Part 1:

I was able to procure soccer shirts, soccer socks and balls, and toiletries for women thanks to the generosity of my school and work friends and families. Stuffed into various bags and suitcases, the supplies were ready to go.

The flight was full and the plane was small. There was a last minute shift of supplies and pesos from the passenger left behind, and a bag transitioned from carry on to checked at the gate. So began an adventure, a Mother's Day gift from my family.

Why a mission trip to an impoverished community across the border? For perspective.

For the past 18 months I've had the pleasure and privilege of working in Preschool Heaven, a school in an affluent community with a generous budget to provide a lot of interesting experiences for some very fortunate children. Before that there was the anxiety of unemployment, even though there were severance checks to keep us afloat. And before that, there was a blissful ignorance of need and the fear that accompanies unmet needs. Fundamental needs like shelter, food and clothing; spiritual needs, knowing you are not alone and that you are loved unconditionally; emotional needs for acceptance and feeling secure.

So how can one very blessed woman even attempt to fulfill any of those needs for someone else in a mere two days? Only time will tell, and God only knows.

Part 2:

The flight to Monterrey was uneventful. My other travel buddy and I were the last of the FPC Marietta mission team to arrive. It was a very short line but a very long wait to have our passports checked before heading to the baggage claim. I passed through without delay and went to retrieve my bags. My travel buddy, a parent of three young children, was not immediately behind me even though he stepped up to the adjacent counter at about the same time. My concern grew as I loaded my four bags onto the x-ray screening conveyor. Where was he?

Then my concern grew stronger as the screeners viewed the contents of one of my suitcases...the one full of deflated soccer balls. Not surprisingly, the bag was taken to another table where another set of screeners proceeded to inspect the contents.

"How many?"

29.

"How much? What price?"

I don't know. They were donated. We are giving them away. To children in Renacimiento. A soccer camp. A women's mission.

More puzzled looks between the screeners. Another screener joins them.

Still no sign of my mission associate.

Was this becoming a mission impossible?

With shoulder shrugs, the screeners move the suitcase of soccer balls to the side and proceed to inspect the second bag, which was full of t-shirts, more soccer balls, a couple of bags of toiletries, some binder rings and a Spanish Bible. Everything was inspected, including the binder rings which seemed the most curious item of all. Upon seeing the Bible verse on the t-shirt and the Spanish Bible, the inquisition was over. A few more cursory glances into my personal duffle and backpack and I was free to go.

And, so was my missing mission buddy who appeared after a few long and frightful moments when he was asked where he was staying while in Mexico...a question he couldn't answer, and in my haste to get my baggage, I was unable to answer for him.

Our greeting party was waiting anxiously outside the doors. I can only believe they must have been praying for us as we muddled through the logistics of customs. Our fearless leader and driver loaded our gear and us into the rental van and we drove through the darkness to the welcoming lights of Los Vientos and our other mission companions.

Part 3:

After a short night's rest, made even shorter by the sounds of roosters crowing long before dawn, we enjoyed a sumptuous breakfast of huevos and ham, fruit, juice and tortillas. The drive to Casa Samuel through the streets of charming Garcia and into the countryside was short and uneventful. The scenery was spectacular, with jagged mountains surrounding the flat and dusty plains.

Upon our arrival at CS, we were greeted by women and children of all ages. Lesson 1: The faces of poverty wear smiles and give hugs and kisses to total strangers.

Lesson 2: Poverty shows hospitality. Due to the lack of running water at CS (a long-standing issue with local politicians) we ladies of the mission team were dependent on the gracious hospitality of one of the CS staff members whose small home featured one of our greatest needs, a working toilet. On her refrigerator she had the name of one of the team's most frequent visitors spelled out in magnetic letters. A sign of adoration I would say.

Lesson 3: Poverty breeds innovation. Homes were constructed of all kinds of found materials. There were some from earlier mission trips which were solidly built of concrete. Others were fashioned out of wooden pallets and scraps of corrugated tin for roofs. The roofs were held in place by all sorts of flotsam, including old car parts and rocks. An old election banner forms a shade barrier in the courtyard at CS.

Lesson 4: Poverty allows belief in a higher power. At lunch we were approached by a teenage mother with a sick infant. The infant was noted earlier in the day for his distinctive blueish hue, his racking cough and labored breathing. The mother and her aunt asked for our prayers for healing. We offered them up, but secretly wished we had the means to diagnose and treat this tiny child of God right on the spot. Strangely or not, the next day he was much improved...

Lesson 5: Poverty is the antidote to affluenza. One dose should cure all signs of affluenza. There was no pretense to be found in this community of helpers and their clientele.

It has been many years since I had the taste of dirt in my mouth, the feeling of dirt and grit on my exposed skin. The wind blows down the dusty mountainsides, across the sandy soil and into/onto every surface and orifice. It permeates everything, and yet the children going to school that morning were dressed in spotless white shirts, pants and skirts.

The playground area, while fairly new, would never pass the safety requirements of the Georgia state licensing agency. It was littered with trash, the play surface was just more sandy dirt. Gangs had made their mark in recent weeks, slashing new swing seats and tying condoms to the merry-go-round.

Lesson 6: Poverty feeds the bottom-feeders. Gangs seek to control and destroy all that is good in the community -- the property, the people.

Day one ended with another meal at Los Vientos. The slabs of meat were delicious, but I couldn't help thinking how many mouths would have been fed from my single serving. My eyes have been opened. There is no turning away from the face of poverty again.

Part 4:

Our initial reminder of the state of things crime-wise in Mexico were the police checkpoints and portable scanners used to examine the inside of any vehicle passing through the toll road gates enroute to Garcia and Renacimiento. The police were stationed several feet away in sand-bagged bunkers. Armed police, of course. Having been to other countries where security is paramount, that sight alone was not frightening.

The second day of our mission trip on steroids began in the very early morning darkness with the sound of peeling rubber...a vehicle accelerating from a stopped position in the immediate vicinity of Los Vientos. Dogs commenced barking and didn't stop until daylight. My roommate's impulse was to hit the floor. Fortunately there were no sounds or signs of gunfire.

Our return trip to Casa Samuel was marked by the sighting of gun-toting, non-uniformed individuals patrolling the perimeter of the charming town square in Garcia. While we joked about it, it was an unnerving second brush with the dangerous undercurrent pervading the region.

And our third reminder of the specter of the Wild West lawlessness was seeing the Monterrey police with guns pointed at a vehicle on the side of the road upon our return to Monterrey that afternoon. Is this how they approach everyone they stop for a traffic infraction?

But what is the real threat to the people of Renacimiento? Is it the gangs and cartels lurking on their perimeter, ready to recruit every 10 year old boy who drops out of school? Who mark on walls with graffiti and slash new swing seats before the children have the opportunity to enjoy the freedom of soaring above the gravelly dirt playground?

Perhaps. But the real threat is ignorance, hopelessness and a dire lack of fundamental resources and services. This was made evident during our tour of the town, stopping periodically to greet the previous recipients of FPC Marietta's building program. Where the church had intervened, there were signs of house pride...some new floors, new porches, walkways. No more of the fragile construction of wooden pallets which does little to protect against rain (which is seldom anyway), cold in the winter and the persistent dust-laden wind. Children and adults warmly greeted our party as we conspicuously walked down the recently paved streets. Some of the cross streets were still dirt roads, but the paving had done much to reduce the amount of swirling dust clouds.

It was a short walk to CS through the village. Once again the women and children were awaiting our arrival. They were hungry. For our attention. For our affirmation. For the Word. Spanish Bibles were distributed to the women gathered in the room. The previous afternoon they had sat listening to the compelling testimony of team members who shared their stories which could have been the stories of the women seated before them. Today, they would fill their Promise Boxes with words of encouragement gleaned from the Old and New Testaments.

I found myself in a hot corner of the room. The promised heat wave was already penetrating the room. It seemed as

though there would be no breeze today, dirty or refreshing. And then another threat exposed itself. Illiteracy. It appeared that two of our guests, women of a certain age, were not able to find verses in their newly unwrapped Bibles, much less to write the verses our leader suggested. So, with my limited Spanish I flipped through the Bible, deciphering as I went along, and copied the verses while repeating them out loud. The giggles were barely audible, but apparently we had found common ground -- my lack of spoken language combined with their lack of ability to read the written word. Others on our team had similar experiences. But illiteracy isn't limited to the oldest generation. There appears to be a trickle down to children who are still in elementary school.

We had witnessed other danger signs in the previous 24 hours. A baby, distinctly blue in color, had been "treated" by a visiting physician. In the opinion of our team nurse practitioner, we were looking at a child in need of a team of specialists, not available to the poorest of the poor in this nearly forsaken place. How many other children were in need of a higher grade of medical care? And the women, for whom prenatal care is likely minimal. How many of them were at risk with every pregnancy? Without sanitary water in many places, how long before a bacterial infection would afflict a large portion of the community?

Honestly, gun toting men aside, my greatest fear comes from microbes. No, I'm not OCD. Just too conscious of those things unseen which pose a threat.

The government officials who visited during the opening ceremonies on Friday made it abundantly clear. The community was in dire need of a health clinic. And it will be up to many more of us in Marietta and beyond to make that a reality. In doing so, we will alleviate many of the dangers which dominate this little community. If we heal the body and the spirit, then they may empowered to overcome the illiteracy and hopelessness which infect them daily.

I have taken too much for granted. Lord forgive me.

Part 5:

In our quest to impart the value of service to one another, we served lunch to the CS staff before we served ourselves. One of our team turned out to be talented taco maker, a skill he may be hiding from his wife. Following the final shift of lunch, the afternoon's entertainment was being prepared.

The "Aldo Show" as it is known, is a variety show hosted by a CS team member disguised by a curly blue wig, clown nose and face paint. He sang, danced and recruited volunteers for his shenanigans. Needless to say, the temperature in the courtyard had approached the mid-90's in the shade of the tarps. It had to be 120 degrees under that blue wig.

Aldo kept up his energy and good humor as he led the female volunteers in the audience through his comedy routines. Even with such limited grasp of the language, I could tell the group was enjoying themselves. They were a rapt audience to

towers of hair mousse cascading down the shoulders of two of the participants. They giggled during corny magic tricks.

The wind had grown increasingly strong as it was channeled between the buildings, and finally it pulled a corner of the largest tarp loose, sending a huge flapping piece of fabric into the audience. Not to be disturbed by such a trivial interruption, the show went on as an agile young man scaled a leaning ladder to the roof and reattached the rope to a piece of protruding rebar.

Then began the door prizes. Being Mother's Day weekend, the gifts were distinctly feminine--chocolate and shoes!

Recipients were delighted. Naturally, the chocolate didn't last long. Aldo wished everyone a Happy Mother's Day.

Goodbyes were teary. The children embraced us, the women embraced us. They hovered around the van as we reloaded the few items we were taking back with us. The most oft heard question, which even I could translate...when will you return?

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the stuff of which hope is created.

Part 6:

Our final goodbyes to our friends of Casa Samuel were said in the courtyard of Los Vientos. As our leader Pat described them, our "eternal" friends.

The CS staff and volunteers expressed their thanks for our presence the past few days. Apparently it was impressionable enough to get some additional support from the Governor's office as well as the local Mayor. Our team members noted that several women accepted Christ that morning.

I had accomplished my own personal mission. To gain perspective. To appreciate the abundance (and perceived inconveniences) of my life. To find the direction in which I might apply my years of wisdom and experience.

Our return trip to Atlanta wasn't nearly as complicated. Bags were inspected but no questions were asked. All the "buddy pass" passengers ended up in first class. We arrived as a collection of individuals and left as a team.

The story doesn't end here. In fact it is only the beginning of a new era in ministry to the people of Renacimiento, Mexico. Hunger, poor housing, illiteracy and crime are constant threats to their survival. By providing access to better health -- both physical and spiritual -- they may be better equipped to combat their many enemies.

For as Jesus told us, Love Thy Neighbor As Thyself. And who is your neighbor? They may be as close as next door, or as far from your present circumstances as the little town of Renacimiento.

Thank you to the team members who so willingly embraced my presence and looked after me -- Pat, Collins, Trina, Brian, Becky, Jean, Barry, Thad and Alex.

Thank you to my daughter Kati who on Mother's Day 24 years ago was baptized and led her mother to this place; and thank you to my other daughter Amelia, another missionary, for providing a Spanish Bible that smoothed the way through Customs. Thank you to my husband Andy for making it possible to follow my conviction, to tame a wild hair.

Finally, I extend a muchas gracias to my Creator for opening the doors and hearts for us to enter in with words of hope and encouragement.

The No Complaining Rule shall be strictly enforced in my life from now on. I did the dishes following my lovingly prepared Mother's Day dinner because I was thrilled at having hot, running water.

Amen.

Postscript: Tales of Hope and Motherhood in Mexico

The ghosts of missions past came to mind last night.

Our team remarked that the last group of FPC Youth to have participated in the program formerly known as "Mexico Mission" will be graduating after next May. A whole group of young people who had the muscle memory of what it was like to build a home from scratch in extreme conditions would be lost with their departure to colleges and far away places.

More than that, we may be losing the spirit of those who have come before us. Jerry Silvers. Dan McIntosh. I remember Dan's passion for Renacimiento, represented on the program for his memorial service. I didn't see what he saw until I viewed it for myself. A rugged, raw and punishing beauty.

As Brian described the improbable circumstances, coincidences if you must, by which our church became a partner with Renacimiento and Casa Samuel, one could only imagine a giant hand reaching down from heaven and moving all the pieces into alignment, like a giant chess game.

We are linked to this place in an eternal way. We cannot let go when we and CS are being called to serve the community in such an essential way. We are all being called to Renacimiento.

Can you hear it?