

Inland volunteers leaving for Nicaragua for annual medical mission

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Betty Gray flew to Ecuador last year for her first medical mission helping indigent patients.

Today, the Loma Linda University Medical Center nurse leaves for Nicaragua, where she and her daughter will be among the 67 volunteers who will perform surgeries, conduct medical exams and prescribe medicine in the small town of Somoto, near the Honduran border. Many are from the Inland area.

This is the tenth trip sponsored by Rancho Mirage-based International Medical Alliance. Until this year, the alliance had always sent volunteers to Ecuador, the homeland of founder Ines Allen.

But the group is expanding its focus to serve the poor in other Latin American countries, said Allen's husband, Tracey Allen, a retired Banning police sergeant who helps with trip logistics. Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere, after Haiti, according to the CIA World Factbook.

Volunteers, who pay their own airfare, will spend nine days at a small hospital in Somoto. Last year, in Ibarra, Ecuador, volunteers saw more than 2,100 patients.

Gray, 51, said she was moved by the experience.

"The people were just so grateful and wonderful," Gray said. "They were so appreciative of even the smallest things."

Gray's daughter Emily Ferguson, 27, of Riverside, is one of several non-medical volunteers who will help with translation, crowd control and other tasks.

Dr. Allen Alejandro, 51, a Yucaipa pediatrician, said traveling to Nicaragua for his first medical mission will not only help others, but also educate him about diseases that he usually doesn't see in the Inland area.

Corey Laval Williams, 37, an anesthesia technician at Riverside Community Hospital, has been going on alliance trips since 2003.

"I look forward to it every year," said Williams, who in addition to his anesthesia work will serve as a surgical technician and translator in Nicaragua.

Williams has also gone on trips with other groups. Last year, he went to the central African country of Burundi.

"This is an opportunity for me to give back in the world," he said. "It feels good to be able to have a positive change in someone's life."

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