

TRANSFORMING LIVES AFAR AND AT HOME

An International Medical Alliance mission to Nicaragua aided those in dire need of care and gave volunteers a new perspective

Jose Fernando Toruna and his mother embrace after IMA surgeons reconstructed his forehead.

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Unable to walk due to a birth defect involving the tendons in her left foot, 6-year-old Aysel Irania Galeano missed the opportunity to learn and socialize with other children. Following surgery in August that enabled her to walk, Aysel attended her first day of school.

Jose Fernando Toruno sustained serious head injuries in a motorcycle accident. An infection following surgery to relieve intracranial pressure resulted in the removal of a large portion of his forehead, leaving a baseball-sized section of his frontal lobe without protection beyond a layer of skin. A new team of surgeons used bones from Jose's ribs to rebuild his forehead.

Born with a cleft lip that worsened as she aged, 67-year-old Santos de Cruz Meza suffered a life of ridicule and being shunned by others. She refused to leave her home without first wrapping a towel around her face. In August, dentists removed her unusable teeth, fitted her for dentures, and repaired her cleft lip.

A team of 63 volunteer medical personnel transformed these patients' lives during a 10-day mission to Somoto, Nicaragua, an impoverished and disenfranchised rural area approximately 108 miles north of the capital city of Managua.

The medical volunteers paid for their airfare and lodging in Managua. From there, they traveled by bus almost five hours along the Pan-American Highway before reaching Somoto. Travel on the two-lane highway is slow because it is crowded not only with vehicles, but also with walkers, bicycles, horses, and donkeys. Approximately halfway to Somoto, the team was stopped at a checkpoint, where they were searched by police. The Pan-American Highway,

which travels north all the way to Canada, is a major route for the drug trade, and such searches are common.

The Nicaraguan government provided for the volunteers' food and lodging in Somoto. The modest hotel where they stayed was clean, but had no hot water and no washer or dryer. As throughout the country, the hotel's laundry was hung outside to dry, which is challenging in such a humid climate.

Working 12-plus hours each day, the volunteers used the local Juan Antonio Brenes Palacios Hospital as their staging area. Each day, large trucks packed with people seeking medical care arrived at the hospital from throughout the region. The age range of patients spanned from infants to 90-year-olds. Some patients waited overnight for their chance to be seen. Nonclinical volunteers helped with planning and organizing the flow of patients, who were categorized according to the services being sought.

Three employees from Desert Regional Medical Center — Sharon Warner and Reyna Loustaunau, longtime operating room technicians, and Reyna's husband, Victor Loustaunau, an anesthesia technician — joined the mission to share their time and talents with the people of Somoto. Organized by the International Medical Alliance of Rancho Mirage, the team of volunteers included general and orthopedic surgeons, anesthesiologists, gynecologists, dentists, nurses, pharmacists, pediatricians, anesthesia and surgical technicians, and many other talented and committed professionals.

Under the direction of CEO Karolee Sowle, Desert Regional Medical Center donated myriad equipment and supplies for the mission, including exam tables,



Six-year-old Aysel Irania Galeano, shown here with her mother, received surgery that enabled her to walk for the first time.

surgical packs, surgical instrumentation, suture, surgical gloves, intubation supplies, syringes, IV supplies, scalpels, surgical gowns, anesthesia circuits, masks, and much more.

Ines and Tracey Allen founded the International Medical Alliance in 2002. Since then, they and teams of talented volunteers have led nine humanitarian missions to Central and South America, bringing medical and dental services to more than 80,000 people with limited or no access to health services. IMA's mission to Nicaragua provided treatment to 8,446 indigent people, including 120 surgeries, 695 dental procedures, and 949 pediatric consultations. Treatments rendered in the course of 1,465 internal medicine consultations ranged from conditions such as urinary tract infections to earaches, skin rashes, gastrointestinal illness, joint pain, and allergies.

The impact upon the lives of the medical volunteers has been as significant as that upon the patients. DRMC's Warner attended to the setup and supply of surgical instruments, as well as sterilization. This was her first time joining a medical mission, and she says she would do it again.

"It was a very humbling experience to go to an area where people survive with [so little]," she says. "It opened my eyes to how fortunate I am. It changed my outlook on life."

Warner convinced Victor and Reyna Loustaunau to get involved with the mission shortly after she enlisted with IMA last spring. The Loustaunaus also say that participating in the mission transformed their lives.

"When I came back, I felt more complete as a human being" Victor says, then adds, "You don't have to go to Nicaragua. We all have the opportunity to participate in some way. Everybody can make a difference for others." ■



Patients arrive by truck to see doctors from the International Medical Alliance during the IMA's mission to Nicaragua in August.

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