




HEALTHIER CHILDREN IN EL SALVADOR AND HONDURAS:
A JOURNEY OF COLLABORATIVE SERVICE, (CONT.)

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of talking to others about them, have certainly had a significant positive effect on my life. I feel confident that our efforts have had a positive impact on many lives, both in Salvador/Honduras AND in the U.S.



(photo, left)
Negli, center, assisted Dr. Abell as he treated patients in Cabañitas. She stood all day at her task when she was eight months pregnant with the child she is holding in this photo, taken one year later.

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Global News and Notes

SPRING 2004

HEALTHIER CHILDREN IN EL SALVADOR AND HONDURAS: A JOURNEY OF COLLABORATIVE SERVICE

by Peter J. Abell

Editor's note: In February 1992, just two weeks after the Salvadoran peace accords were signed, Peter J. Abell, an orthodontist from Vermont, participated in a seminar to El Salvador organized by the Center for Global Education. That trip marked the beginning of a remarkable journey of collaboration and friendship with the people of El Salvador and Honduras. With the strong support of Rotary Clubs in the U.S. and abroad, Abell has inspired many others to join him in taking visionary action toward a more just world. His efforts have spawned the formation of the non-profit organization Pure Water for the World as well as numerous delegations to El Salvador to provide dental and optometric care. Here is his story.

When I heard that Theresa Lever of the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ was organizing a trip to El Salvador in February 1992, my interest in that country had already been growing. I had been following the Salvadoran civil war as reported by Tom Gibb of the BBC on public radio for many years. I had seen a thought-provoking play, *A Peasant of El Salvador*, by Brattleboro natives Peter Gould and Steven Stearns. In addition, Jack Bixby, minister of my church (Centre Congregational) and a good friend, had visited several Central American countries with the Center for Global Education in 1989 and related his experiences to me. I was appalled that our government continued to support the regime in power and to supply weapons and "advisors" after all of the atrocities being committed by the army and national guard that were reported on the radio. I wanted to see for myself what my taxes were paying for. I had some trepidation about going, not because I feared for my safety, but because I was afraid that what I was going to see would be overwhelmingly depressing. When my son Kim, who was then 24, told me that he was going to join Theresa's group, I decided I'd go largely because of him.

That experience was, for me, life-changing. My senses were bombarded with new and different things. At my request the group had a meeting with Tom Gibb, the BBC correspondent who had been stationed in El Salvador for several years. His experiences were fascinating and much easier to listen to than the Spanish-speaking presenters—we didn't have to wait for the translation! Another highlight was the night the group



Dr. Peter Abell (standing at center) has been instrumental in organizing yearly delegations to El Salvador to provide dental and optometric care. He is pictured here with his wife Marion (left) in Suchitoto in 2000.

spent out in the boonies at a refugee re-population village named El Sitio Cenicero.

From Awareness to Action

Following my return from the trip, I was asked to give talks and show slides, and I did so in several venues, including the Rotary Club in Brattleboro, Vermont, of which I am a member. The club's president was interested in the club becoming involved in an international service project, and he asked me to spearhead a project in El Salvador. I thought back to El Sitio Cenicero, where the kids went to school in an old chicken coop. I had been very impressed with the "mayor" of this village, a strong woman named Mercedes Menjivar, and felt that she would be an effective collaborator. I suggested to my Rotary Club that we form a relationship with this village and invite a Salvadoran Rotary Club to join us in improving the quality of life of the villagers and helping them build a school. Briefly, we recruited the San Sal Northwest Rotary Club to work with us, and I put together a group of people (some Rotarians, some not; some health care professionals, some not) to go down in February 1994.

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"I must say that each of these trips has been very rewarding and everyone feels he or she gets more than is given. We also have lots of laughs and make connections with some really good people in the country."

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This first working mission, arranged for us by the Center for Global Education, included two dentists, an optometrist, three nurses, a pediatric resident, two spouses (including my wife Marion), a retired technical writer, and a staff photographer from the *Brattleboro Reformer*. Our dual intentions were to provide dental, optometric, and medical care to the people and to help build the school.

In the months before the trip we solicited dental surgical instruments and supplies from dentists in Vermont, as well as used eyeglasses from local people. At a series of meetings at the office of optometrist Jenifer Ambler, the glasses and dental equipment were washed, scoped, sorted, and packed.

We were met at the airport by Center for Global Education staff member Kevin Connors and several members of the San Sal Northwest Rotary Club. Their presence really sped up our passage through customs and immigration. Our gear was not even opened!

After the first night in a guest house in the capital we traveled out to Suchitoto, a beautiful Spanish colonial town. It had been a garrison for the Army during the war and therefore was not damaged like most of the surrounding little peasant villages, which had been carpet bombed. (Your tax money at work.)



Optometrist Jenifer Ambler participated in the first Brattleboro delegation to El Salvador to provide dental and optometric care in 1994. She has returned every year.



The dental crew poses with friends from the Cabañitas community in 2000.

Kevin had arranged for us to do clinics in several small villages, including El Sitio, over the course of a week. Jerry Theberge (the other dentist) and I did extractions only, and Jenifer did eye exams and gave out glasses. The nurses and the pediatric resident examined kids and treated minor ailments. The construction on the school was not yet ready to begin, but some of our group worked on clearing the land. At night we slept under the stars on the porch of the El Sitio clinic on mattresses that Kevin was able to borrow from the nuns at the Pastoral Center in Suchitoto. The roosters crowed all night long in our honor.

Long-term Commitments

That trip was the first of seven to provide dental and optometric care to El Salvadorans. There was a hiatus of three years before the next dental/optometric trip. Jerry and I decided we wanted to be able to do fillings as well as extractions, so we convinced our Rotary Club to fund a field dental unit, chair, and compressor. We would only need electricity, but in 1997 most of the small villages did not have it. My friend from dental school, Dick D'Alessandro (and his wife Sally) came on that trip as well, so there were three dentists. He rented a portable unit from the Christian Dental Society, so we had two dentists doing fillings and I did extractions.

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travel opportunities

GUATEMALA

NICARAGUA

NICARAGUA

The Center for Global Education offers alternative travel experiences that will expand your horizons, challenge your perceptions, and strengthen your spirit. Join one of our travel seminars listed below, designed for people who want an in-depth learning experience.

For more information on any of the following programs, or to be kept up to date on additional programs being scheduled, contact the Center at 1-800-299-8889 or <gloaled@augsborg.edu>.

Please note:

The price for all international travel seminars includes all meals and lodging, ground transportation, programming, language translation and interpretation, pre- and post-trip resources, honoraria for local resource people, fees for planned activities, and airfare as indicated. If airfare is included, other departure cities may be available and the price from those cities may vary.

Social and Political Realities in Guatemala: Reconnecting with *La Fraternidad de Presbiteriales Mayas*

July 24-August 1, 2004

The 1996 Peace Accords brought an official end to four decades of armed conflict in Guatemala that left an estimated 200,000 people dead, the overwhelming majority of whom were Mayan. Truth and reconciliation processes such as the Historical Clarification Commission and the Recovery of Historical Memory Project were initiated, but the terms of implementing the peace accords are still disputed today. During the seminar, through daily meetings and visits with local resource people, participants will examine conditions including discrimination, repression, and inequality that pose challenges to Guatemalans working for justice. Participants will also learn about Mayan spirituality and its relevance in the defense of indigenous rights and culture. The travel seminar affords a unique opportunity to join in the cooperation of the sponsoring organization, the Washington Park United Church of Christ, with its sister parish in Guatemala, *La Fraternidad de Presbiteriales Mayas*, during an excursion to the city of Xela. *Price: \$1,075. NOTE: The cost of this trip does not include airfare. Application deadline is May 10, 2004.*

Introduction to the Developing World: Nine-Day Immersion Experience in Nicaragua

August 1-9, 2004

The people of Nicaragua are intimately familiar with suffering caused by political oppression, war, poverty, and natural disaster. Nicaragua presents a compelling case study for examining dictatorship, revolution, U.S. intervention, democracy, and the relationship between the developed world and developing nations. Participants will explore efforts at bringing peace and economic opportunity to a country facing the challenges of overwhelming national debt, dropping coffee prices, inadequate educational and health facilities, emigration, an expanding maquiladora sector, the growth of fundamentalist churches, and the persecution of political leaders. Join other individuals concerned about social justice, economic development, and human rights in a country of stunning natural beauty. Sponsored by the Women's Center at Tidewater Community College in Virginia. *Price: \$1,156. NOTE: The cost of this trip does not include airfare. Application deadline is May 3, 2004.*

Nicaragua in Transition

August 2-10, 2004

Study the history, goals, successes, and challenges of the Sandinista revolution and its legacy for Nicaragua today. Participants will be challenged to think about alternatives—alternative political, economic, and social structures—through close examination of the "alternative" that was the Nicaraguan revolution. For what did the revolution stand? Is it still alive? What do the successes and failures of the revolution represent for contemporary Nicaraguans—in particular, for the poor? What has been the role of the U.S. in influencing the revolution's impact on the current Nicaraguan political, social, and economic reality? Daily meetings with a variety of local representatives, excursions in and around Managua, and group reflections will enhance this experiential-learning seminar. *Price: \$1,799, including airfare between Minneapolis and Managua. Application deadline is May 17, 2004.*