



Travel, with a humanitarian purpose

Nurses learn about global issues while treating the poor of El Salvador and Honduras

Kaley York

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When the British Columbia Nurses' Union posted an ad for a two-week learning excursion in El Salvador and Honduras, I jumped at the opportunity. One snowy morning in December, I was thrilled to discover that I would be one of 13 registered nurses sponsored for this expedition. I could picture our group visiting the people of El Salvador and Honduras as humanitarians on a mission.

The first week we stayed in San Miguel, a busy city three hours drive from the capital of San Salvador. We travelled to Lolotique, a rural community about 20 minutes drive from San Miguel. Lolotique is the base for the non-governmental organization APSIES, which is a community-based organization dedicated to health and social services. Fortunately we had the expertise of our translator, Carol Wood, program director of Co-Development Canada, a non-profit organization based in Vancouver.

My peak experience was in Las Marias, a rural community about half an hour from Lolotique, where I assisted the health team in making home visits. I remember walking up into the hills with nurse Gilberto, teacher Roberto and the school students during visits to 25 homes. As we trekked up the dirt roads surrounded by jungle growth, Gilberto used his megaphone to announce that nurses from B.C. were coming to visit.

The poverty was evident when we saw rundown shacks housing large families of six or seven with garbage littering the floors and neither running water nor latrines. If mosquito larvae were present in the water, we would record the number and add a small plastic bag of chemicals to disinfect the water. Many of the children were malnourished, appearing many years younger than their stated age.

The pervasive poverty stands in contrast to the richness of the natural environment, with trees full of cashew fruits, bananas and mangoes surrounding the area.

After a short break visiting the Mayan ruins of Copan, we moved northeast to San Pedro Sula, a bustling city with questionable air quality. The pollution is thick, making the hot and humid air very uncomfortable. We passed industrial parks where sweatshop factories called maquilas are clustered. Our mission in San Pedro Sula was to meet with the team at CODEMUH, the Honduran Women's Collective, to learn more about the advocacy work done to protect the rights of women and maquila workers. We also had the opportunity to tour a factory owned by a Canadian clothing company.

I remember first learning about maquilas after reading Naomi Klein's No Logo in first-year English. However, this did not prepare me for what I was about to see within the walls of a maquila. Even in the waiting room, the repetitious sound of busy machines sewing threads into clothing could be heard. Upon entering the factory, I was struck by the oppressive atmosphere of loud machines and fabric fibres floating in the air.

The middle managers providing the tour assured us that the air conditioners had special filtering systems and the workers were provided with face masks and earplugs on an optional basis. However, we saw the workers were wearing their face masks improperly, hanging them around their necks or below their nose. The machines fired non-stop and the workers were craned over their machines, intent on fulfilling the high production goals of 500 dozen of a specific item in a 12-hour shift.

When we visited the factory's health clinic, the nurse and doctor greeted us. When asked about the most common injury they treated, they said it was small cuts and pricks from the sewing needles.

However, in talking to the maquila workers at CODEMUH, we discovered that musculoskeletal injuries are the most common injury in the maquilas, resulting from the repetitive stress of sewing the same thing for hours. Although maquilas are important to the economy of Honduras, the workers are suffering as a result of long shifts, repetitive job tasks and the lack of labour unions to protect their rights.

The people we met were strong and resilient, and I was affected in a profound way. As Canadians we can help by first taking an interest in global issues like poverty and injustice. Once powered with knowledge, we can focus our efforts on taking action such as raising community awareness or becoming members of non-profit organizations that advocate for humanitarian causes such as achieving global justice, building international partnerships or eliminating poverty.

Many organizations accept donations in the form of direct payments or sustainable gifts like goats and chickens that can be purchased online and given to communities in need. These are just a few ways to help create positive change for people and communities around the world.

Kaley York is a public health nurse in Salmon Arm and will be entering a Master's of Nursing program in the fall.

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