Pastor Diana Turner, Hope Lutheran Church of the Sierra, South Lake Tahoe, shares the following Facebook post from a young woman, Rachel, a nursing student who visited her great uncle and aunt, Peter and Connie Friederici in Purulha, Guatemala, where they live during the winter months. Peter is a member of Hope Church and a summer resident of South Lake Tahoe.

It’s been a while since I’ve had a chance to post anything, but with everything being cancelled and postponed lately due to Coronavirus, I’ve got a bit more time to actually make a post about Guatemala! This spring break I decided to fly down to visit my great uncle Peter Friederici and great aunt Connie Friederici in Purulha, Guatemala. Purulha is a small village in the mountains of the Baja Verapaz Department of Guatemala. Peter and Connie live there for most of the year, and spend their time living out God’s command to “love your neighbor” by opening their home to some little kids to come play and learn after school, helping the guy across the street start his own bakery, teaching the kids at the local school how to garden, supporting the nearby mission organization, and I could go on and on.

Recently, they had a new idea of how they could serve their community. Like I said earlier, Purulha is very remote and very high up in the mountains. It is an absolutely GORGEOUS area, but it is very far away from any sort of medical facility. The closest clinic is a 2 hour walk (most people’s mode of transportation) from the village, and the closest hospital is an hour drive from the village, so you can imagine how long that would take to walk! So Peter and Connie thought “How cool would it be to set up a mobile medical clinic right here in our backyard!” So they did! They got donations from a few doctors’ and dentists’ offices in the US, loaded everything up into a motor home, and drove it down to Guatemala.

Now this is where I come in. When I arrived in Guatemala everything was just...there. Medical supplies in cardboard boxes and garbage bags, no rhyme or reason or organization whatsoever. Peter and Connie, as amazing and gifted as they are, don’t have much medical training or knowledge, so they hadn’t been able to sort through the supplies. So I went to work, sorting and cleaning...
and organizing until everything was put away. Then Peter and I and the brilliant handyman (and new friend) Adam set to work on the motor home, transforming it into a fully functional medical clinic, complete with examination tables, tools, bandages, blood pressure cuffs, medicine – all the doctor's office things you can imagine.

So we were done! Phew! It was a mobile medical clinic, all set up for a trained team of medical professionals to come open up and see patients some time in the future. That's it! Nope! Uncle Peter said, “You know, Rachel, you could open up the clinic for a day before you leave, and see some patients.” And I was like, “No, I totally can’t! I’m just a nursing student! What do I know? I can't prescribe anything. I can’t do procedures. I can't even diagnose. How on earth would I ever be able to help someone who came into the clinic?” But Peter said, “You don’t understand. Even the little knowledge that you do have can be really helpful for people! Just listening to people and giving them advice, or just simple suggestions for how to live a healthier life or avoid certain things is huge.”

So I prayed about it, and God said, “Go for it!” So we did. On the night before my last day in Guatemala we posted signs on the street outside their house, saying, “Free first aid clinic 8 am – 3 pm.” I went to bed that night with so much anxiety. I was nervous that no one was going to come. I was nervous that too many people would come. I was nervous that I wouldn’t know how to help someone. I was nervous to do it all by myself. But I prayed that God would give me wisdom and strength, and that He would be glorified no matter what happened.

That morning we put out some registration sheets for people to sign and write down their chief complaint, and we had plastic number cards for people to hold their place in line. And people started showing up! Adam, the kind handyman, was my translator, and he and I went to work! Patient after patient came in and expressed a need for help with numerous different issues: headaches, muscle and joint pain, loss of appetite, children not developing properly, skin conditions like chicken pox or eczema, fevers, coughs, gastrointestinal problems, etc.

It was a learning experience as the day went on, because I had to figure out how to best help people being the only somewhat medically trained person there, with minimal supplies at my disposal. But as the day went on I realized that simply giving advice such as, “Drink 8 cups of (clean) water every day,” “Use Tums/Pepto Bismol for heartburn, and eat less greasy food,” “Vegetables and protein are the most important things to be eating, especially for growing kids,” “Do these stretches for this muscle pain,” “Do xyz to help your baby latch on when breastfeeding,” “Do xyz to get rid of/prevent the spread of chicken pox,” “Use a cane like this to help with joint pain as you age.” I also had some supplies that I was able to give to people: an arm sling to an elderly woman who had injured her shoulder, probiotics to some people who had GI issues, Tylenol for fever, acetaminophen for acute pain, some lotions and creams to people who had issues with dry and cracking skin, and more.

There were also some people that I wasn’t able to help right then and there, and that was tough. Many people came with GI issues most likely related to a parasite from drinking contaminated water. I had to tell them that they need to get special medicine from the doctor to kill the parasite, and then to be careful to drink only clean water. One mother was very concerned about her little girl who every few days would “fall over and shake and throw up and become unresponsive, and then not remember anything.” It was obvious to me that the little girl was having seizures, but the mom had no idea what a seizure was. I explained to her what was most likely happening in her daughter’s brain, and told her what precautions to take to prevent injury during a seizure. I told her to take the girl to a doctor to have the seizures evaluated and treated. It was tough not to be able to help some people more, but I know it was still valuable to give them direction regarding the next steps they should take, including telling some it was necessary to make the long,
expensive trek to the hospital in Coban.

At the end of the day (which ended up being 8 am – 7 pm with one break to pee) Adam and I had seen about 80 patients. And even more people enjoyed a lovely day outside while Peter and Connie taught golf and bocce ball, gave massages (Uncle Peter was even doing chiropractic adjustments for people), and served lots of snacks. I couldn’t stop thinking about the story in the Bible where Jesus fed over 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish, and that’s kinda what God did here too! He took the donated supplies, one nursing student, one bilingual handyman, a man and a woman who love their village, and a motor home, and used it all to meet a huge need in this community!

I am still amazed and honored to have been a part of this day. I am praying that God will raise up a team of medical professionals who are willing and able to open up the clinic again sometime soon! If you made it this far into this novel of a FaceBook post, thanks you for sticking with me! There are so many stories and details and aspects of this week that I wasn’t able to include, but I hope your view of our Mighty God is a little bit bigger, and that you got a glimpse of his glory.

Rachel

Do you have a story that you would like to share? Send any Church Together story requests to mic@spselca.org.