SISTERS OF ST. FRANCIS, STELLA NIAGARA, NEW YORK

# Chiapas Connection

Autumn 2014

## First Visit Leaves Lasting Impression

Dr. Peter Kowalski, with Sisters Gracie and Maria Elena, is a Buffalo native and family medicine doctor. He experienced his first trip to the Chiapas Medical mission in April 2014.

He prepared for the trip by enlisting the help of the students at Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament School, in Depew where his daughter teaches. The Student Council voted to collect items for this Chiapas trip for their March Service Project. They generously gifted 114 toothbrushes, over 200 tubes of toothpaste, and other toiletries.

*"The team we had was amazing. Different personalities, from different parts of the United States, each with our own talents, all working together to take care of the patients we saw.*

*The trips to the villages were special. We saw so many patients — on one day we had over 150. The clinic days proved to be busy as well. There were different diseases and physical findings and I even made a house call with Nancy, one of the nurses, and Sisters Maria Elena and Lety. We all had to squeeze in a 1960's Volkswagen Bug car to get there!*

*It was an incredible experience! The patients were so appreciative of the care. Everyone was welcoming and absolutely wonderful to work with. I would go again in a heartbeat.*

*From a personal perspective, it reminded me of why I went into medicine — not for the paperwork or insurance hassles, but the opportunity to help people."*

## Maintenance Volunteers Join Team

While there have been previous maintenance teams who have helped at the mission, April 2014 was the first time that they were present during the medical mission.

While the doctors and nurses were tending to patients in the villages, Eugene Wyss (pictured at top) and Dennis Gorman (center photos) — handymen extraordinaire — stayed at the convent tending to numerous repair projects.

They tackled painting jobs, minor plumbing and electrical challenges, and tiling. By the end of the week, they were familiar faces at the local hardware store, even picking up a few Spanish words needed for their projects.

The doctors, nurses, maintenance crew and translators know their week will be intense with the work planned for them, yet there is ample time for exploration, too. The entire team visited the Mayan Ruins together at the beginning of the week, which turned out to be a great bonding experience. In the evenings, they played cards after enjoying some amazing food. One night, they treated the sisters to pizza and ice cream in Palenque.

The mission is so much more than the biannual team of doctors and nurses. Pharmacies at Mount St. Mary's Hospital and Pine Pharmacy in Western New York, and Santa Maria Drug Store in California donate vitamins and medicines that are too expensive to purchase in Mexico. Local parishes and schools gather supplies and monetary support from friends and family helps pay for the medicines and salary of a local doctor who is on-call throughout the year. None of this would happen without the generous hearts of so many friends.

Most importantly, the mission demonstrates how a group of strangers with generous hearts can come together to make the Sisters' vision of helping the indigenous a reality.

# Managing the Mission with Compassion for All

*(An excerpt from a letter written to sisters and associates by the provincial leadership following a visit to the mission in Mexico).*

Among the many ministries that our Chiapas Sisters enter into is pastoral work that is done not only in Palenque, but also in numerous small communities outside of Palenque itself.

Sr. Mica, who has been in the community for 16 years, engages in pastoral work with 34 village communities, serves on an Indigenous Theology Committee, accompanies the deacons in faith support and development, and serves on the Acculturated Liturgy Committee (she is the only woman and one of 2 indigenous on the committee). This last year she also worked on the Bible translation committee.

Sr. Lety finished her studies and received a BA in Nursing in 2013. She is a great resource for the clinic. Sr. Lety also does pastoral work in a special diocesan ministry to women and works with 11 village communities and their catechists. She has also been in the community for 16 years.

Sr. Candi has been in the community for 10 years and made her final profession last year. She is the "on call" nursing technician for the clinic. When patients arrive she can do their intake, give injections, take vital signs, etc. She works with the doctor and also dispenses medications from the pharmacy. Sr. Candi helps prepare for the medical missions, works with youth in the villages to prepare for the sacrament of onfirmation and accompanies the catechists of 12 village communities. She, like all the sisters, accompanies a sister when they have pastoral work that requires more than one person or traveling at night.

Sr. Ilse was received as a novice in August of 2013 and is planning on finishing her secondary school in 2014. She helps with First Communion preparation (Sr. Candi mentors her in this), and accompanies the sisters to outlying villages when needed.

Sr. Consuelo (Connie) has a myriad of ministries beyond that of formation direction and general coordinator/administrator of the Palenque community. She facilitates liturgy education, prepares coordinators to teach Confirmation, offers pastoral care to families, and advocates for hospital patients by serving on the Citizens' Coalition. She offers retreats to many groups at Casa Franciscana — the sisters' motherhouse. All the sisters take turns leading the Sunday celebration at San Juan Diego chapel, assisting with the Medical Mission and mutually supporting one another in their ministries.

There are other sisters from across the United States who visit the mission regularly to assist and offer support. Together they share the call to transform unjust structures and to hear the cry of the poor.

Due to changing governmental regulations, the clinic building needs to be reassessed and reevaluated by an architect before some needed changes can be made.

Currently there is a physician that comes in three days a week and the pharmacy functions around the clock. The need for the clinic is growing each and every day. While there is a hospital in town, it serves only those who are able to pay. As a result, it is the poor that get little or no care.

## *Mission Statement*

*Responding to Jesus' call to serve the materially poor, the medical missions of the Sisters of St. Francis minister to the indigenous poor in and around Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico. The collective spirit of mission members is characterized by compassion, respect for the God-given dignity of each person, and quality health care.*

**Thank you, our friends and donors, for making this possible!**

**Volunteers are needed for Medical Missions — especially dentists.**
If you can lend your medical expertise,
please consider this important ministry.

**Our wish list items include:**
Childrens' toothbrushes and small tubes of toothpaste
Multi-Vitamins - infant & children (NOT gummy vitamins)
"Cheater" reading glasses
Ibuprofen and Acetominophen
Antibiotic ointment
Thermometer covers
Cash gifts (to purchase medicines)

We are especially grateful for the support of Mount St. Mary Hospital in Lewiston, N.Y. and Pine Pharmacy in Niagara Falls, N.Y. for their generous donations of prenatal and children's vitamins and other needed supplies, as well as the University at Buffalo Department of Family Medicine that encourages young residents to participate in the mission.

It's easy to donate online and to get the latest news of the ministry by visiting **www.stellaosf.org**

**Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity**
**Chiapas Medical Mission**

**Sr. Nancy Zelma**
**Medical Mission Coordinator**
716-754-4312 ext. 9777#
nzelma@stellaosf.org

**Barbara Johnson**
**Office of Advancement; Donations**
716-754-2193
bjohnson@stellaosf.org

4421 Lower River Road
Stella Niagara, NY 14144-1001