

A Mother-Daughter Weekend-Volunteering Mexican Style

By Christine Shanahan (daughter of Brenda Dintiman, MD)

A mother-daughter weekend usually consists of a trip to the lake or a weekend in New York shopping but not this time. It was a Mother-Daughter weekend Mexican style. After hearing Dr. Roberto Estrada speak last year, my mother decided that we should try to give a little back by volunteering. Other than exchanging a few e-mails about the basic logistics of the trip, we really had no idea what to expect. I had been to Cozumel, Mexico, but Acapulco was a mystery to me. It is known for its beaches and cliff divers but we had no idea what the mountain towns of Guerrero would be like.

Even though I am 16 years old and have taken 5 years of Spanish, I still don't feel comfortable speaking the language. I set out to go on this mother-daughter volunteer weekend. The program takes a group of dermatologists and other support people to a different town in the state of Guerrero, Mexico for a weekend of volunteering every month.

Neither of us knew exactly how we were going to be helpful, but you can imagine with my lack of medical expertise, I had no idea how I would be able to contribute.

When we arrived at the airport, I was more excited than nervous. Since I had no expectations, I really had nothing to lose. My mom had booked one night at a very nice resort. After a night in a resort overlooking the ocean, we packed our small bags up and took a taxi to Dr Estrada's office in the city. My mom had met him before so she was happy

to see a familiar face.

We loaded boxes and boxes of medicines and containers of "mystery cream" into the van. While I did that, my mom and another dermatologist from North Carolina, Dawn Kleinman, MD, watched some slide shows of skin conditions. Both of them looked confused at first about what was going on, but then they became aware that Dr. Estrada had decided that their Spanish was good enough to give a lecture the next day to the local doctors. I think my mom was freaking out but she held it together pretty well. Dr. Estrada went

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through his slides at the speed of light, thinking that my mom knew all the vocabulary. My mom can speak Spanish fluently but she never formally learned all the medical terms in Spanish. So, this was the start of our adventure.

After a minor panicky moment, we all got in the van and took a 3-hour drive on winding roads to the town of Ometepec. The scenery changed gradually as we went up the mountains. Small wooden homes were spread out miles away from



Christine Shanahan volunteers at "the pharmacy" in Mexico. According to Shanahan, "I realize that you can go to another country with an open heart – not a lot of knowledge – and still help in a volunteer program."

each other and men rode donkeys on the road. The lush green roadsides turned dry and dusty.

When we finally arrived at the city of Ometepec, we stayed in a hotel overlooking the streets. On one corner women were making tortillas, on another corner, men sold souvenirs like swords, leather belts and hats. As I looked at all the people, I noticed many different types of attire. Some women wore colored shapeless dresses with a translucent white or blue poncho over it and others wore jeans and a t-shirt. The men also dressed differently with sombreros and white gauchos. I asked Carrie Robles, the physician and pharmacist, who was part of Dr. Estrada's team, why they were dressed so differently. She explained that it was a big multi-cultural town that brings people from many smaller towns. The idea that this town was the big city made me wonder about how the people lived in the nearby small towns.

Next we traveled to Tlacoachis-

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MAKING A DIFFERENCE



Brenda Dintiman on a volunteer trip to Mexico with her daughter, Christine Shanahan.

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tlahuaca, a very small town where there were more than a hundred people sitting in chairs under the cover of what was considered the town square pavilion. It looked like a place kids might play soccer with open sides and a roof to shield the sun. Men and women in white coats were also scattered among them setting up 6 tables and chairs on either side of the rows of people. My mom and I were uncertain of what this gathering was. We soon understood that these small tables in the open were stations for the patients to go to for medical consultations.

My mom was almost in shock because she thought we would be seeing patients in a church or a building. As we looked around everyone stared back at us, especially me with my fair skin and American clothing. The mayor of the town then made a welcoming speech to the town people, introducing the doctors and calling this program the “Jornada de Dermatologia”. It was like he was announcing the Olympics and saying “Let the games Begin!” As he spoke, I could understand his welcoming speech but in the background another voice could be heard. It sounded like muffled Spanish but I was mistaken.

The background voice stopped at the same time as the mayor’s Spanish did. I was confused. Carrie then whispered to me that not only was Spanish spoken here but an ancient language Azteca and a local language Amuzco. The first

thing that came to my mind was, “Oh, great! Not only do I not know Spanish very well, but I won’t be able to communicate with more than half of the people. Not even my mother can help me now.”

Dr. Estrada and my mom discussed placing me in what he called the “pharmacy.” The pharmacy consisted of two foldable tables with massive amounts of randomly placed prescription and non-prescription medications. The best part about it was that they were all named differently than the English products. My mom, Dr. Estrada and Dr. Kleinman saw all the patients and then diagnosed them and wrote prescriptions quickly. These patients then went to a family practitioner at the tables to have their condition recorded and

documented. Then they came to the pharmacy with their prescriptions for anything from sunscreen to acne medicines. In the beginning I was really intimidated because Carrie and the other women seemed to have the system down. Slowly I became more confident and was able to speak enough Spanish to convince them to let me organize the medicines. I actually got really good at the whole system by the end of the day.

At one point I realized I had been filling some of the scripts with a cream with calamine instead of without and my mom assured me that these were compounds that were similar to what was used in dermatology many years ago and were very safe. They didn’t have to rely on samples from drug companies but could have more medicine made by the state pharmacy and sent to the small town to continue their treatment. It was a brilliant system!

Over 500 patients were seen and cared for in the middle of a plaza and we provided advice for treatment so that the family practitioners could continue to treat them long after we were gone.

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To find out more about volunteer opportunities in Mexico, visit <http://www.aad.org/professionals/VolunteerOpportunities/MexicoOpp.htm>



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