

Compassion Story of the Month

With Brattleboro voting overwhelmingly to become part of the international Charter for Compassion, the Reformer and The Commons have agreed to publish a "compassion story of the month." This is the twenty first. Information on submissions from Brattleboro area residents is offered below.

Compassion Abroad through Bite and Sight

Peter Abell, Marion Abell and Jenifer Ambler

In the late 1990's, the three of us organized a group of individuals to visit El Salvador and treat indigent persons in need of eye exams and dental care. There were a dozen of us - teens to retirees, professionals and helpers from all walks of life. We called ourselves "Team Sight and Bite" and carried with us donated eyeglasses, dental instruments and disposable supplies from optometrists and dentists throughout Vermont.

On one of these days, we traveled by small boat across Lake Suchitlan to a remote area, unloaded our suitcases, reloaded them into the back of a couple of pick-up trucks and continued our journey deeper into the backcountry. We pulled up at a small building with an open-air porch where we found long lines of villagers who had been recruited by local health workers and had travelled long distances on foot or horseback to get there.

After setting up our makeshift "offices," Jenifer proceeded to examine a diminutive elderly woman and found prescriptive glasses as close to the woman's needs as she could. Jenifer gently adjusted the frames and assisted the woman to stand and make room for the next patient. The woman, with a look of total amazement, stared at her surroundings and, with tears trickling down her cheeks, exclaimed loudly, "God Bless - I can see the birds again and I can read my Bible." Imagine! Returning home, we spoke about our deeper understanding of the dictum that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Over the past 27 years, groups of us from this area have been offering such services to needy persons in El Salvador, Honduras and Haiti. The experiences have been memorable and, by all accounts, have proven to be useful and highly valued. Those of you who have worked in low income countries will resonate with the extraordinary understandings that emanate from such work.

All of this began in the early 1990's with a memorable visit Peter made to El Salvador with the Center for Global Education. The Brattleboro Rotary Club, inspired by a talk Peter gave upon returning, then sponsored a trip for dental, optometry and other medical specialists to provide services to a refugee population in the small El Salvador village of El Sitio Cenicero. The observations of this group

led to further investigations by students from SIT and Dartmouth, culminating in a major initiative by our Rotary Club – in concert with the San Salvador Noroeste Rotary Club, to provide potable water solutions to villagers. The non-profit Pure Water for the World was the result, a registered 501(c)(3) organization with offices in El Salvador, Honduras, Haiti, and the US. Through comprehensive water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) efforts – both hardware provision and intensive counseling, Pure Water has saved many thousands of lives in these countries.

And imagine this:

In 1994, a group of us together with a team from the San Salvador Noroeste Rotary Club visited a humble village, El Sitio Cenicero, located deep in an area that had been controlled by guerrillas during that country's civil war. The *directiva* (governing body) of the village asked to meet with us all, and we sat around a table under the huge Amate tree (from which, we later learned, peasants from that village had been hanged during the war). It felt like a micro summit meeting. To the local folks, the San Salvador Rotarians represented the country's wealth – as a power elite seeking to maintain control and subjugation of the peasants. (Conversely, despite the fact that the U.S. supported the Salvadoran army, treasury, police and death squads, despite the fact that the area had been carpet bombed by U.S. planes, *we*, shepherded in by a justice-oriented NGO, were seen by the peasants as sympathetic to their plight).

All of us were more than a little nervous. But the unforeseen was in store: By the end of the meeting, the combined assemblage of us had together come up with a plan for the construction of a much-needed school for the town. Something important had taken place, and it felt like our presence had made a difference.

Peter's early visit also generated for Centre Church a sister parish relationship in El Salvador with a small congregation located in the community of Cabañitas. Its pastor, Francisco Aguilar, had been working without a salary, surviving on welding jobs he did on the side and doing his pastoral work by bus. Centre Church helped out with the provision of automobiles, and established a scholarship program which has taken some children from kindergarten to the university. Meanwhile, teenage girls from the two congregations have developed long term friendships.

Let us close with a heartbreaking story from our work in Haiti, one we weren't able to affect, but which brought home to us the desperate struggles encountered by so many of the disenfranchised living in these countries.

Peter and Marion had traveled to Jeremie, a town about 100 miles west of Port au Prince where we were providing similar services. On the last day of our stay, an old woman, far beyond child bearing age but cradling an infant girl, was patiently waiting for an exam and treatment. Our translator told us that local folks called this grandma "Madame Sarah", and that she had cared for her granddaughter ever since the baby's mother returned to the city to work. The old woman approached

us speaking in her Creole dialect and held the baby out to us. Our translator paused, and then haltingly explained that the woman was asking us to take the child with us back to the U.S. and care for her. We were brought to tears realizing what it must be like to sacrifice your child to total strangers in the hope that the baby would survive and live a healthy life. Her tragic plea had to remain unfulfilled.

Our hope is that Brattleboro itself might soon develop a sister community relationship with Cabañitas, focusing on the extraordinary work taking place there - and remembering also this extraordinary connection.

Note from the Compassionate Brattleboro Committee: Fittingly, the 2018 Brattleboro Unsung Hero Award went to dentists in our area who have delivered such services and who have provided free treatment to low income individuals locally.

Submissions, from Brattleboro area residents, for future publication, not to exceed 650 words, should be emailed to: compassionstory@gmail.com or mailed to: Compassion Story of the Month, c/o Robert Oeser, PO Box 6001, Brattleboro, VT 05302. Please include your name, address, phone number and email address. Earlier submitted stories will automatically be considered in subsequent months.