

## Doug's Honduras Trip Report Fall 2020

### Department of Family Medicine University of Rochester

Due to COVID, the Department was unable to send people to Honduras in 2020. I decided to go by myself on my vacation time. This report is a summary of what I experienced and accomplished.

#### Travel

My first attempt to visit San Jose in September failed at the Rochester airport when I was told my 4-day old COVID test was too old. Honduras requires a COVID test less than 72 hours old. I regrouped and successfully reached Honduras on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, after having obtained COVID tests 60 hours and 34 hours before my flight. I rented a pick-up truck and began the 5 hour drive from Tegucigalpa, the capital, towards San Jose, my final destination. As dusk was falling and a rain was beginning, the truck stopped working when the interpreter and I were still almost 2 hours away from San Jose. We were in the middle of nowhere. Fortunately, we were able to get a cell signal and reach the rental agency. They suggested they would send help very soon. Five hours later, a man arrived with a replacement truck. We spent the night in the town of Esperanza. The following day we got supplies and money in local currency then drove the hour or so to San Jose.

#### General Comments

San Jose people reported the rains were good this year. Fortunately, we had rain a few days early in the trip so we had enough water for bathing and dish washing. The downside of the good rainy season were rock slides covered much of the width of the road in multiple places between Esperanza and San Jose. A very fortunate thing for me is the interpreter was an excellent cook so I enjoyed good food. For those who have eaten Maria's cooking, I would say the interpreter and Maria's cooking are similar in quality. COVID cases in San Jose seem rare. The Community Health Worker who works in San Marcos, but lives in San Jose, was infected a few months ago. Rumor is there have been 6 cases identified in all of the San Marcos county.

#### Food Delivery

Back in June we delivered 11,000 pounds of food to 293 people. We targeted the old, sick, and very poor. Given the rains have been good and therefore harvest was good, I encouraged Roney, the teacher, to be as selective as possible to identify only those most needy. We delivered 8,000 pounds of food to 200 people this trip. Recipients were very appreciative. There were no problems encountered during the ordering and delivery of food. Roney did a great job organizing this activity. Each person got 10 lbs of rice, 7 lbs of beans, 23 lbs of corn and 2 kg of cooking oil. The Unitarian Church of Rochester and our Department partnered in providing the food.



*Repacking grains by weight*



*Sacks for each family ready to go to families*



*People beginning to carry food home.*

## Water Filters

Backing up a bit in time, I purchased 50 water filters and loaded up the back of the pick up truck prior to leaving Tegucigalpa. We had run out of filters in November 2019. We use filters made in Honduras by an artisan who lives near Tegucigalpa. The down side of having a truck full of fragile clay filters was the need to transfer the filters from the original truck to the new truck when the original truck broke down. Hopefully most of them made it to San Jose safely.

## Scholarship Students and Education During COVID

The scholarship students were the main workers for weighing and packaging the food for distribution. As part of the agreement, students must do communal labor/service. These enthusiastic young people made short work of creating 200 separate sacks of food from 8,000 pounds of grains.

In September, the Unitarian Church and the Department were able to get money to Roney and the students who are in University. Roney needed money to purchase a printer, paper and printer ink so that he could create homework packets for students to take home. Distance learning is being attempted in the San Jose area, but is not really possible given there is limited/no cell signal for cellular data, almost no one can afford a smart phone, and no one has a computer. Therefore, Roney prints out homework packets, kids walk the 1-5 miles to pick up the packet, complete the homework if they are able, then walk back to return the homework to Roney. Area schools have started holding in-person classes again for those students who struggle with the distance learning approach. Most parents in the area cannot read or write so parents' ability to help their kids learn school work at home is extremely limited.

I delivered letters written by the sponsors of each scholarship student and carried back responses from these students. The Unitarian Church manages the scholarship program. For students who can walk to school from their home, sponsors pay about \$250 a year per student. For students who must move to the town where the middle school is, they require \$500 support per school year. These relatively small amounts of money allow poor students the chance to continue their education beyond 6<sup>th</sup> grade.



*Melissa talking with Maria Gloria about farming. Unfortunately, both women not wearing masks (but I was).*

## Agriculture/Coffee

I met with Maria Gloria, the main farmer we presently get coffee from and support with novel seeds and new ideas. I paid her the outstanding balance from the coffee we sold here at HFM last Fall. She really appreciated the extra \$680 she made from 84 pounds of roasted coffee. I had already paid her last Fall the going rate for the 100 lbs of green coffee we brought back to Rochester. This trip, I am happy to report I was able to bring back 50 lbs of green coffee for sale. It is all the Lempira variety. After roasting, hopefully we will have 40 lbs or so for sale. Her farm produces about 1,300 pounds of coffee a year.



*Scorpion pepper*

We have introduced almost 20,000 heirloom vegetable seeds to the San Jose area over the past few years. Maria Gloria is doing the best with these seeds in terms of growing and saving the seeds for the following growing season. By far, the most popular seeds are for hot peppers. One pepper in particular is hard to grow and easily destroyed by local pests. Working together with Maria Gloria, she is successfully growing the

Scorpion pepper. This pepper is ranked as the 3<sup>rd</sup> hottest pepper in the world. When she talks about this pepper her eyes light up and a grin breaks out. Apparently the hotter the pepper, the better. She says it has a wonderful flavor. I think she means your mouth is visibly smoking when you eat food cooked with this pepper. So far, she only has 30 plants growing but we hope to expand that and begin selling at area markets. Others who have tried this pepper love it and really want to purchase it. This trip I brought more seeds, including seeds for the world's 2<sup>nd</sup> hottest pepper.

A year ago we talked about diversifying her crops. She planted 12 cacao (chocolate) trees and has some giant mangoes. too. Next, she hopes to grow more avocado, coconut, and lemon trees, as well as start growing mandarin oranges.

Right before I left San Jose to return to the US, a coffee farmer from the town of San Marcos approached me about us collaborating. He has a fairly small farm producing about 500 pounds a year. He has converted entirely to organic coffee farming. Although he didn't have any coffee to give me during this trip, hopefully, we can bring back his coffee next trip and give it a try. The long term goal is to import a 20 ft container of coffee yearly from the San Jose area. This is the best way to bring outside money into the San Jose area in an effort to combat the crushing poverty.

### **Meeting with a Representative from the Mayor of San Marcos**

San Jose township is in the county of San Marcos and, therefore, the San Marcos mayor is the mayor for San Jose. Given I was not overseeing the usual group of residents, I had time to meet with Francisco Molina Sorto, from the mayor's office. My goals were to learn more about activities happening in the area to improve health and wellness, inform them of our activities and initiatives, and see if collaboration was possible. Some of the topics covered included the government water project (still not working well in San Jose area), prospects for job creation (none really), agricultural initiatives (none right now), solar systems for isolated homes (project stopped due to COVID), and a few other areas. I presented what we have been working on and thoughts for future projects. I would call this meeting a re-opening of communication with the local government. I did not find attempted collaboration in the past helpful, but am hopeful they will see the value in a partnership.

### **Meeting with Local Project Manager and restarting projects**

Over a year ago, we let the prior project manager go for multiple performance issues. We are working with a new person Edys Reyes. Based on what I am seeing so far, he is doing a great job. A year ago, I gave Edys the task of placing gutters on the clinic building and then run pipes about 250 feet to our 4,000 gallon water tank. He did a great job. He water proofed the water tank as requested and buried some exposed pipes coming from the water tank. Edys also started work on a walkway from the volunteer house to where we normally meet and eat. He used up all the project supplies we left in the Fall of 2019 within about 2-3 months. The completed projects include: 19 pilas, 12 cookstoves, 1 latrine, and distributed 6 water filters. He has lined up already 10 more pilas, 2 latrines, and 2 fogons.

A big reason for me visiting San Jose was to replenish project supplies. Doing so requires hiring a large truck, spending a day in the town of Esperanza running around finding the supplies, driving back to San Jose, then unloading all the supplies. We bought enough to complete the anticipated projects and many more.

### **Clothing Distribution**

Melissa, the interpreter, brought about 100 lbs of used clothing with her from Tegucigalpa for distribution to the very poor. Especially many of the children own only a few pieces of clothing. I was particularly struck by one boy who was wearing a boot on one foot and a shoe that was falling apart on

the other foot. It was so nice to see the smiles on the children's faces as they received 'new' clothes. These used pieces of clothing are the best things they now own. Melissa's seven year old daughter, April, also gave away most of her toys. Children in San Jose generally do not have the luxury of toys. They were so happy to receive toys. It was better than Christmas for them.

**Summary**

I was gone for 11 days. 5-6 of those days were spent on travel. Many more things were accomplished and many more meetings were held than listed here. I am always amazed by just how much we can accomplish in a few days in San Jose. I do enjoy service vacations, as this one was. The only problem is I am so tired from this vacation, I need a vacation from my vacation. :-). A special thanks goes to Melissa Rivera, the Honduran interpreter, who made all this work possible, given I don't speak Spanish and need help with cultural stuff.



*Happy children getting second new clothes*

**How You Can Help**

Thank you so much to the Highland Family Medicine family and the Unitarian Church for their continued support. Our work in Honduras would not be possible without this support. There are a couple ways you can help support us financially without actually donating money. When you shop at Amazon, please do so through the link on the [www.sanjosepartners.org](http://www.sanjosepartners.org) website. The Amazon link found on the website's home page allows us to receive 4% of your purchase price as a direct donation from Amazon. It adds nothing to your cost. Another way to support our San Jose efforts is to participate in the Silent Auction that is held every December. All money raised supports our Honduras project. If you are creative, donate one or more of your creations to the auction. Everyone is welcome to bid on items in the auction. This is a great way to get Christmas gifts for family and friends.

The easiest way to support our efforts is to visit the Donate link on the [www.sanjosepartners.org](http://www.sanjosepartners.org) website and make a donation. For Highland and UR employees, you can even have the money taken out from your paycheck. Most likely you will not miss a few dollars from your paycheck, but the benefits for thousands of other humans will be life changing.

**Update on Project Status** (updated Oct 27, 2020). Numbers under count, in general, due to poor book keeping.

Project	Completed	Project	Completed
Cookstoves	363	Scholarships	100+ students, 36 current scholars
Filters	402	Fluoride varnish	>470 children Oct 2019
Latrines	159	Fish farms	6
Pilas	136	Piped water systems	5 communities
Heirloom seeds	>18,000 given		

**Personal Observations on Life in Tegucigalpa, Honduras**

For me, life is mainly made up of opportunities to learn. As I interacted with Melissa and even visited with her half sister and her family, I got to learn more about life in Honduras's capital city. My work

overseas has mainly focused on the rural poor. It was enlightening to learn more about the city poor. It also gave me more concrete insight into why Hondurans want to come to the US.

There are very few jobs in Honduras. The majority of the population cannot find work. That is why you see kids darting between traffic on city streets to sell snacks or trinkets. They need to make a dollar or two so they can eat. We pay about \$15 a day for interpreters who work 10+ hours a day. This is the most money Melissa will make for months. One time she was lucky to get a job in a department store during the Christmas season. She worked 12-hour days, 7 days a week for 8 weeks. At the end, she was given about \$150 pay. Bus fees to get to the job were almost that much. The boyfriend (Alex) of Melissa's sister Ana recently started making shoes from scratch. There is no work so he is trying to make money by making shoes that sell for a few dollars each.

I visited Ana's apartment on my way out of Honduras. There are five kids and 2 adults living in a tiny dark apartment that is partly underground. There are 3 kids in one bed and I think the other 2 sleep in the main room. I didn't see other areas for sleeping. There were no bedrooms I could see. Ana cooks for 7 people with a single-pot kerosene burner in the main room. I was very worried about carbon monoxide poisoning, but they do not have other options at this time. The neighborhood is too dangerous for the kids to go out much, especially the 16 year old girl, so they stay in this tiny dark apartment most of the day and night.

Of course, most people's life stories are much more complex than this. I am telling only the briefest bits of the story. For example, Ana went into labor at term back in July. She checked into the government hospital and after an initial evaluation was put to the side without being checked on for many hours. When a health worker finally checked on her, the baby was dead. Probably a cord event. Or the fact that one of the kids living with Ana is a child of Melissa's oldest sister who got to the US in one of the caravans. Being an undocumented immigrant, she cannot really work except for under the table child care. She is able to send some money back that allows the family to live in a 'nicer' apartment than they had before. There is much more detail to the story I tell here, but you get the idea. Life is hard for so much of humanity.

Speaking of violence, Melissa and her daughter live in another part of the city where a gang war is raging. The gang of MS-13 'owns' the area, but the 18 Gang is trying to move in. Kidnappings and killings are common. A man who lives across the street from Melissa was on the national news recently when police raided his apartment and seized a stash of money, drugs, and weapons. He was back in his apartment within 2-3 days and life continued as usual for him. This suggests the police may be in league with the gangs. Another battle raging in Melissa's neighborhood involves bus and taxi drivers refusing to pay 'protection' money to the gangs. The end result is gang hit men are killing drivers, often even while driving a bus full of people. In one instance, a hit man and his motorcycle driver were captured and beaten to death then burned on the streets. This happened after other drivers caught the gang-hired killers during a hit on a driver.

I have to keep reminding myself that these events are not the movies. This is real life for so many people. No wonder Hondurans want to move to the US to relative safety and make enough money to raise a family. Who can blame them? I wish there were easy answers, but there are not. Hopefully reporting on the struggles of others will help you better appreciate the world we live in.