

# Refuge International

Annual Newsletter, 2014

HEALTHCARE ♦ WATER ♦ EDUCATION ♦ NUTRITION

## Chocolá clinic provides care for indigenous Mayan people

By: Nereida Moreno

In 2005, Hurricane Stan brought torrential rains to Central America and caused a series of landslides over the next several days that buried numerous towns and killed more than 1000 people. The rain didn't stop for three weeks in Guatemala, the hardest hit nation. The downpour caused an epidemic of respiratory infections in Chocolá, a remote village in western Guatemala.

Dr. Sergio Castillo, operator of the only fully functional hospital in the region, struggled to make his medical supplies last through the storm. For days, dozens of indigenous people slept in front of the hospital, waiting for assistance. But Castillo's pharmacy could only withstand a week's worth of ailments. Every day, more and more people—whole families—would show up with pneumonia and illnesses induced by the weather.

"We couldn't charge them money because they simply didn't have any. There were babies whose lives depended on whether or not they had antibiotic treatments," Castillo said. One Friday morning, Castillo realized they had completely run out of supplies. "This is it," he thought. "What more can we do here?"

On Saturday, there was a loud knock on the front door. Nervously, Castillo answered; he didn't want to turn away another person asking for medicine. Dressed in a bright yellow raincoat, Dr. Don Garrett, a volunteer with Refuge International, appeared in the doorway. "He said he was there to help," Castillo said. "He was the answer to our prayers."

### New Beginnings

Dr. Sergio Castillo and his family worked independently in Chocolá for about four years until they began working with Refuge in 2005. "To have a complete team of surgeons, nurses, anesthesiologists, armed with medicine was like the answer to our prayers," Castillo said.

Refuge agreed to supply the necessary equipment as well as provide medical, surgical, and construction teams several times a year. Partnering with Refuge has allowed Castillo to serve communities that were far away and in desperate need of medical assistance.

### Mission Statement

*Refuge International is a compassionate 501(c)3 volunteer organization dedicated to the goal of improving the lives of families and individuals through the collaborative development of sustainable programs in areas where healthcare, adequate nutrition, clean water, and education are lacking or non-existent.*

**AND MORE** *Refuge International also provides opportunities for mentoring of students who wish to become involved in humanitarian efforts. And our efforts have paid off!*



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*Women from the mountains  
near Chocolá*

Many indigenous people reside in the mountainous southwestern region of Guatemala where there is no government assistance with education, health, or roads—they are the most remote towns, and the most abandoned. Castillo said he has met patients in their late 50s who have never seen a doctor before.

“Why does that happen? Sadly, because of the country’s political climate, there is no priority for indigenous people,” Castillo said. “They’re abandoned.”

“For me, it’s an honor to be able to help our people,” Castillo said. “Refuge allows me to help others. I’m like a bridge for people with extreme needs and the services of Refuge.”



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*Traveling to the clinic*



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*Elderly Indigenous man in his typical Mayan dress*

## Chocolá

Deborah Bell and her team hold clinics about three times a year in Dr. Castillo’s Chocolá hospital. “He really wants to help the people in the area, so what we do when we come is that we try to boost the revenue,” Bell said. “He’s an amazing man. He really is a missionary to his own people.”

There are some people who can’t afford to have surgeries done in Castillo’s private hospital. He saves those patients for when Refuge arrives; Castillo still charges for those surgeries but it’s a minimal amount. “We come and we try to do as many surgeries as we can and we try to see as many patients as we can,” Bell said. “It’s like spinning the wheel, we try to keep that wheel going.”

She said the team is currently working on plans for a consistent clean water supply in Chocolá. There are clinics planned in March, May, and July.

# Dr. Sergio Castillo embarks on mission to aid Guatemalan people

*By: Nereida Moreno*

In a remote village near Mazatenango in western Guatemala, Dr. Sergio Castillo and his family provide medical assistance for the indigenous people living in extreme poverty. Castillo first visited Chocolá, Guat. about 15 years ago with his wife, Veronica. The couple was shocked to encounter villages in deficient conditions with advanced illnesses including malnutrition, infection, and waterborne illness.

On his first trip, Castillo examined over 150 patients in one day. “We saw the needs of the people, which was astonishing because we realized we didn’t know the country like we thought we did,” Castillo said. “We were like tourists.”

However, Castillo returned to his OB-GYN residency program in Guatemala City; he was halfway through his program with a promising future in the medical community. Landing the residency in the capital had been his life’s goal. His family had built a life there. But Castillo couldn’t get the people out of his head or his heart.

After consulting with Veronica, Castillo decided to quit the residency program. They left the capital to establish a permanent residence in Chocolá. The family sold everything they had with the intention of starting a hospital catering to indigenous and low income families.



*Dr. Castillo*

They found an abandoned building in the heart of the community that was perfect for the job. "I asked the community leaders to let me build a hospital here," he said. "And they thought I was crazy." Castillo had to negotiate with over 700 families to buy the building.

After finally agreeing to sell him the property, the community leaders warned Castillo that the patients would not be able to pay him. But there was no changing his mind. "It was very expensive but it was worth it because it gave us the ability to make a difference in the community," Castillo said.

## Family Practice

The hospital at Chocolá is truly a family practice. Dr. Castillo lives in the building with Veronica and their four daughters. His wife works day and night to ensure that volunteers feel comfortable staying in their home during the missions with Refuge. She is head chef, preparing three meals a day, and helps wherever she can. When her four daughters are home from school, they offer administrative assistance and translate for the indigenous clients.

One day, while his daughters were scrambling to catch the school bus, they found an older woman waiting outside of their gates. The woman complained of severe pain in her lower abdomen. She arrived the previous night but slept outside so as not to disturb the family.

Castillo determined the woman had kidney stones. He called an anesthesiologist and operated immediately. After recovering for a week, the woman asked to leave and timidly informed the doctor that she had no means of paying him. "I understand. God bless you," Castillo said.

Two months later, as the family once again scrambled to catch the bus, the woman reappeared. Castillo was immediately worried.

The woman smiled. Once again, she had spent the night outside of the hospital. But this time, she did not come as a patient.

"I spent the night praying for you and your family. I want to show you my gratitude," she said.

## Disregarding Prejudices

In Guatemala, there is a division of people—a prejudice, really, against the indigenous population. When former colleagues learned that Castillo was treating indigenous patients in the rural mountains, they stopped shaking his hand.



*Dr. Castillo in surgery*



*Dr. Castillo*

"It's not the best situation to work or live in because of the prejudice and because you know that people in extreme poverty are not able to pay you money," Castillo said. It's not unusual for patients to pay Castillo with a bag of fruit. Or a live chicken. Or a fresh batch of tortillas.

In order for the hospital to stay afloat without payments, Castillo said he adopts a Robin Hood mentality.

Indigenous people live north of the mountains, Castillo said. To the south, there is a Ladino population that is able to pay for some of their treatments.

"One must retain a humanitarian and Christian mentality. Accepting money from the Ladinos allows us to provide the indigenous people who cannot afford to pay with free treatments," he said.

*"No one has ever become poor by giving."*

—Anne Frank

# Elena Cocom

By: Nereida Moreno

In late September, a six year old Mayan girl walked into Refuge International's clinic at Chocolá with a mass the size of a baseball above her right eye. Clenching her father's hand, Elena Cocom showed no signs of pain or discomfort as the doctors examined the protruding bulge.



*Elena*

The family had traveled two hours from a rural Mayan village to seek medical attention. They had run out of options, and were forced to leave their village for the first time. Her father, Domingo Cocom, spoke little Spanish. He sat quietly with his daughter in the waiting room of the Chocolá clinic while his wife nursed their newborn son outside.

The pain began 6 months ago. Domingo discovered a shallow scrape on Elena's forehead and dismissed it as an insignificant wound. They visited local doctors who prescribed her mild pain medicine. They believed it was an infection that would eventually dissipate. However, over the course of two months, the scrape had rapidly evolved into a rigid mass that was encroaching on the little girl's eyesight.

He knew of Dr. Sergio Castillo and asked for help.

The family traveled to Chocolá to see Dr. Castillo during one of Refuge International's fall clinics. Deborah Bell, president and founder of Refuge, examined Elena first. As she gently pushed the child's dark brown hair from her face, Bell found two purple scabs on the mass. Her father explained that the mass had occasionally oozed a yellowish fluid which healed over time.

Bell called in Dr. Ken Eveland, general surgeon and vice president of Refuge, for a surgical consultation. He and Bell both hoped it was an infection. In Guatemala, tropical diseases caused by fungi often grow to become surgical problems. "I thought I was going to find an abscess — that's why I took her into the operating room," said Eveland. When he cut into the mass however, he discovered it was not an infection. It was a solid tumor.



*Dr. Eveland examining Elena*

The drainage that was causing her skin to scab was a tumor that had completely eroded through the skin. "It was basically an open ulcer in the skin that fluid had dried and formed what we call a scab," Eveland said. "And mom will tell you, don't ever pick a scab off the root."

The team found several lymph nodes in her neck. Elena was suffering from a malignant growth that was spreading cancer through her body. Eveland extracted a thin sliver from the mass so a pathologist could determine what kind of tumor it is. Elena will have to be evaluated with a CT scan to see how thoroughly the disease has spread.



*Elena's surgery*

"All of this is supposition. The pathologist will tell us exactly what we're dealing with. Until we know, I don't know if surgery or radiation will offer her a cure," Eveland said.

Dr. Castillo will follow Elena's case to ensure that she receives proper medical treatment at the

National Children's Hospital in Guatemala that treats patients from low income families.

## Animals in the clinic?

By: Deborah Bell

In August, the Refuge team was joined by Dr. Dennis Rennato Marroquin Godoy, a veterinarian from Guatemala City whose passion is the care of animals in his country. He believes strongly that by improving the health of animals, he improves the health of the Guatemalan people. Dr. Marroquin, along with Refuge volunteers, spent the week teaching the people in Sarstun and Coroza about the care of their animals, most especially their chickens and their pigs. While providers were in surgery and



*A malnourished pig*

clinic, Dr. Marroquin imitated animal noises and taught a group of people how to best care for their animals, which ultimately will affect their own health. Most of the medical personnel stuck their heads out of their exam rooms to see what was happening. His animal calls were so real!

Chickens are life-sustaining birds for most families in the area who rely on their eggs, a renewable source of protein, for their sustenance. Dr. Marroquin along with volunteers vaccinated 446 chickens with a trivalent vaccine to prevent common illnesses.



*Dr. Marroquin teaching the village about care of their animals*



*Deworming a thin calf*

In the villages surrounding Sarstún, pigs are raised, not for consumption, but as the only source of income for the families who own them. Several times a year, a group of villagers travel by boat to Livingston or Puerto Barrios, holding their pigs on their laps. They will then sell them for the only cash they will receive during the year. For subsistence farmers and fishermen, money is hard to come by. Dr. Marroquin vaccinated pigs in each village and taught about the importance of parasite control to increase the weight gain of these animals.

Dr. Marroquin also neutered local cats and dogs during his week in Sarstún. Having him work at what he is passionate about, helping his countrymen with the talents he has was amazing to watch.

## Dental Care in Sarstún

*By: Dr. Jose Angel Molina*

Five years ago I had the pleasure of meeting Deborah Larson Bell in Livingston Izabal. On behalf of Refuge International, she wanted to know how to help the Sarstún population meet their dental needs. I proposed working in conjunction with medical teams, providing basic dental work and extractions for the population.



*Dr. Molina working*

I perform dental cleanings, fillings, dental extractions, pit and fissure sealants, dental resins, root canals, and fluoride applications. I also give oral education talks and distribute toothbrushes and toothpaste donated by Refuge volunteers. The benefit has been so great that I am currently attending children in villages surrounding Sarstún where the need is much greater. All sponsored by Refuge International.

Refuge donations are needed to cover the costs of our dental program in the Sarstún area of Guatemala. We need your support to pay for not only Dr. Molina's salary but all of the supplies he uses in his work. Plans are to continue to expand the dental care to outlying villages in the Sarstún area.



*A child's teeth with bad cavities*

Initially the clinic did not have any furniture or dental equipment, but thanks to Refuge, the clinic now has a complete dental unit, x-ray equipment, surgical suction, a dental compressor, and all necessary materials.

It was decided to give priority to children in schools and where the number of decayed teeth, periodontal problems, and dental abscesses was high.

Starting two years ago, a care program for children enrolled in school was started. I work in Sarstún four days a month, where



*Children lined up to see Dr. Molina*

# Refuge Volunteers travel to Chocolá clinic

By: Nereida Moreno

In September, Refuge International traveled on a medical mission to Dr. Sergio Castillo's clinic in Chocolá. The team completed 24 surgeries and procedures in less than one week.

Jessica Waldo, 32, is a registered nurse at St. Alphonsus hospital in Ontario, Oregon. She volunteered with Refuge in the Sarstún clinic last year and came to learn. "I did a lot of research for medical missions online," Waldo said. "Medical missions can be expensive. But this one just sounded different."

Embarking on her second trip, Waldo said she wanted to continue to challenge herself and learn more about health care in a different country. Alongside the other volunteers, she worked 10-12 hour days in the operating room. "We're not just throwing money at a problem," Waldo said. "I feel that we're truly affecting lives."

Dr. Lola Page, 69, began working in Guatemala in 2005. The surgeon from Covenant Hospital in Lubbock, Texas, has been working exclusively in Chocolá for the last few years. "I appreciate what Dr. Castillo does here with the Mayan people," Page said. He's a good man and he has a good heart and I wanted to help him. I consider him *mí amigo*."



*Dr. Page doing what she does best*



*Dolores Pasierb, Nurse Anesthetist. A Refuge regular.*

Page said she has no plans to leave Refuge any time soon. "As long as my health and skills are good, there will come a time when I know I'll get too old to operate but I'd like to come just to assist or see clinic patients as long as I can."

Page and Waldo were two of six volunteers for Refuge in September. There are three more Chocolá trips planned for March, May, and July.

Despite having a short staff, president and founder Deborah Bell is glad that they made the fall trip possible. The team was able work limited resources to diagnose a six year old Mayan girl with a malignant tumor. Dr. Castillo will see that the child receives further treatment. "Imagine if we hadn't come here and gotten that diagnosis for her? That's reason enough to come. It's not always about the numbers," Bell said.



*Dr. Lola Page and Jessica Waldo*

*"Life's most important and urgent question,  
"What are you doing for the good of others?"*

*—Martin Luther King, Jr.*

# Hiway 80 mission

*By: Deborah Bell*

The first time I went into the front door of the mission I have to admit I was a little uneasy about what I was going to find. As I walked in, I was greeted by no fewer than six men with a warm welcome and a friendly “thanks” for being there. Every time I have the privilege of serving in the clinic, I am greeted with the same friendliness with offers to carry whatever it is that I have in my arms. I have never felt more welcomed in my life...and that includes some houses of worship I have attended. The Mission I speak of is a homeless shelter, Hiway 80 Mission in Longview, Texas.

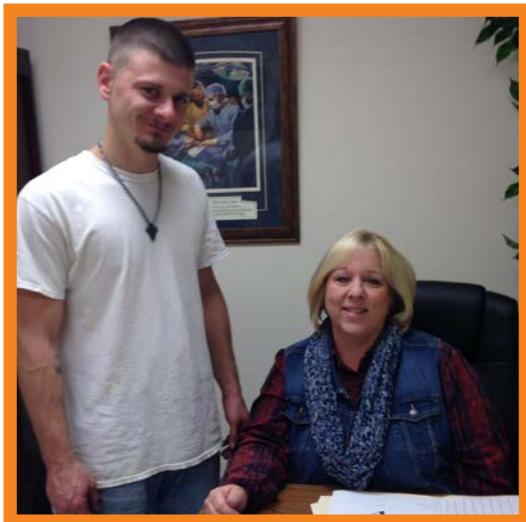
For about five years, Refuge International volunteers have provided health care to the people who reside at Hiway 80 Mission. Debbie Mahoney, a Nurse Practitioner and Refuge International Board Member, uses her half day off every other week to see patients in the clinic. Dr. Richard Kirkpatrick, an Emergency Room physician serves as the clinic director. In fact, his entire family helps in the clinic when needed. Dr. Kenneth Skipper, a retired physician works whenever he can. Cheryl Gilliam, a licensed pharmacist, gives of her time and talents twice a month to make sure that prescriptions are written correctly and keeps the pharmacy running smoothly where over-the-counter medications are provided for patients. A small amount of an anti-inflammatory or allergy medication can make a world of difference in how one feels.

Brenda Green, a Refuge volunteer, enthusiastically oversees providers, arranges the schedule, and works miracles to make sure that the patients seen get any needed care that the clinic is unable to provide. Brenda says, “I am thankful for the opportunity to volunteer at Hiway 80 Rescue Mission Clinic and Refuge International. Being able to work with Hiway 80 and Refuge over the past two years has been a life-changing

experience for me. I have always had a heart for helping others, and Hiway 80 Clinic has offered me the opportunity to serve those in need. While my intention was to help others, I found that my own life has been touched by both the volunteers and the people they serve. From the first day I volunteered at Hiway 80, I have felt respect for those who give of their time helping others. The respectful compassion that I witness in the care given by the healthcare providers and other volunteers has only been equaled by the humble gratitude that the patients have shown for the care they receive in the clinic. I would like to thank Anna O’Brien for inviting me to volunteer at Hiway 80 Rescue Mission Clinic and to Deborah Bell for allowing me the opportunity to serve others.” As her inspiration, Brenda quotes Acts 20:35 - I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.

Refuge International has helped annually to provide \$112,000 worth of medical care given free to the needy people in our community,” said Eric Burger, executive director of Hiway 80 Rescue Mission.

The poor will always be with us. Help us continue our work with your generous donation today.



*Brenda Green registering a patient*



*Dr. Debbie Mahoney examining a patient at Hiway 80 Rescue Mission*

*“I believe that every human mind feels pleasure in doing good to another.”*

*—Thomas Jefferson*

# Refuge International's Guatemalan Director Edy Cojon talks about his work

"Refuge International has been one of the most beautiful experiences of my life. I have had the opportunity to help many people, to meet many people and especially to share with these people. As Director of Refuge International I can say that it takes a lot of effort and dedication to carry out the work, but all of this is made possible by the help of foreign volunteers and local people who actually develop each project in their communities where Refuge is working. I would like to thank all of the Refuge supporters, and God bless all the people who help through your donations and help the Project Refuge International projects grow every day in Guatemala."

Your donation is needed to continue funding and growing our projects in Guatemala.



*Edy Cojon*

"Refugio internacional ha sido una de las experiencias más bonitas de mi vida, tener la oportunidad de ayudar a muchas personas, conocer a muchas personas y sobre todo compartir con estas personas... Como Director de Refugio Internacional requiere de mucho esfuerzo y dedicación para realizar algún proyecto, pero todo esto no fuera posible por la ayuda de los voluntarios extranjeros y de todas las personas locales que hacen realidad cada proyecto que se desarrolle en alguna comunidad que necesitan de la ayuda, a todos Muchas Gracias y Dios bendiga a todas las personas que ayudan con su donativo y hacen que cada día crezca más el Proyecto de Refugio Internacional en Guatemala."

## Refuge International Board of Directors

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"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

—Margaret Mead