

Journal for Day One!

So we started the day off with breakfast and devotions, and then we went through a schedule for the day. The first thing we did was lay down gravel around the property because it was SO muddy. Almost everyone was working on the gravel, so that got done quickly. After that, there were a couple jobs that had to be done. One of the jobs was digging up the dirt near the front entrance because we wanted to get the front gate installed, so the ground had to be more level. Another job was weaving a green material through a fence that was around a portion of the property. Another job was cutting the rebar that was sticking up along the walls from when the walls were first built. The last main job was cleaning the tiles in the future house so that they could be sealed. Everyone took part in at least one of the jobs. Then we had lunch, and right after lunch we began bagging rice. I have never seen so much rice in my entire life, and we didn't even finish bagging half of it after two and a half hours. Eventually, some of us took "showers", meaning getting a bucket of water and bathing yourself in a camping shower tent. Once everyone was ready, we headed over to Casa Hogar to visit the kids and make them dinner, which was hot dogs and popcorn ☺ It was interesting being back there after two years; there were lots of new kids that I didn't recognize, but there were also several that I remembered, and I could even remember a lot of their names. It was amazing how much they grew, because it felt like just the day before was two years ago when we were staying there. After we'd eaten and played with the kids, we left to head back to the Simply Smiles Center of Operations. Our van is very similar to the vans used in Mexico for tourists, and Bryan filled up the van's tank while we were on our way back, causing us to get pulled over by Mexican police, because in Mexico, you're not allowed to get gas with passengers in the car if you're in one of these vans. Bryan spoke with the police officer and everything was fine. Now I can tell people I was pulled over in Mexico, haha. This was not the end of our night, however. When we got back to the Center of Operations, Bryan had to make quite a sharp turn into the property, and the van ended up practically against the corner of a wall. When Bryan tried to go in reverse to turn a little more, the van got completely stuck in mud, so everyone immediately had to get out. Jill, Josh, Gordon and Chris pushed the front of the van while Bryan gave it some gas and steered. The back tire, which was the one stuck in mud, came right out of the mud, however the front tire ended up getting stuck in the same exact spot. So everyone pushed again and they were able to get the van totally out of the mud, but Jill's entire foot got submerged in it to the point where you couldn't even see her foot. Chris helped her out and rescued her flip-flop, Bryan got the van through, and everything was fine after that. Needless to say, it was quite a first day in Oaxaca.

- Deina Pesino

Day 2

Hola from Casa Hogar ;

Our second day began prematurely with the sound of someone's phone alarm at 5:30am (thanks Sarah !). Once we all awoke for good we enjoyed delicious pancakes cooked by Gordan, sausages and french pressed coffee. After morning devotions, work assignments were divided. The main task for the day was to bag the rice for food distribution on Friday. Many hands working together completed this job by noontime.

We had a lively lunch (Edith's sandwich's), and a watermelon spitting contest (thank you Dotty) The afternoon consisted of weaving the chain link fence (for privacy), sealing the tile in what will be the caretakers house, and draping tarp over the cement wall to prep for painting tomorrow. After a productive and hot day of work, everyone enjoyed a bucket shower, which felt wonderful !

The evening events included having a delicious soup dinner with the kids at Casa Hogar and some great play time. All the children are eager to please, and so very full of energy. It was another great experience, though always hard to say goodbye not knowing when we will see these precious young people again.

Nancy, Joyce and Dave, we all miss you and your helping hands. This will be the last posting until the group returns because we do not have internet access. Look for more postings on Sunday or Monday.

Hasta Luego amigos ! Fran Graves and Judy Watts

Day Three (5/18)

How do you explain a trip to the dump? Do you focus on the heat, the dirt or the smell?
Or do you focus on the families living and working there?

I think about the families working long hot days in the dangerous and dirty conditions to do work that no one else wants to do. Trying to survive and made a better life for their children so that they won't have to work in the dump.

I look at their homes (those built by Simply Smiles mission teams). Safe, strong homes that offer shelter from storms and sun. Small houses that families take pride in and make their own. I think about new tile added to the floor and composting occurring outside. And I think of the huge smiles as I am welcomed in – not as a stranger who has never been to Mexico before- but as a welcomed guest.

- Jennifer Coulburn

Day Four (5/19)

The second part of our journey begins...

We clean up the site, putting away the stove, water rack and sleeping mats by placing them into the building, half of which will become Juan's home in the future as the operations center develops. We leave the new found dog, "Ramona Quimby Age Eight", behind. Will she be there when Juan and Bryan return? We're leaving Oaxaca, the children of Casa Hogar and the residents of the dump behind. We get to see a few of them again for a brief moment as Kristen drops off some medicine for a woman there.

On the way, Kristen tells us that our route south is where the film "Y Tu Mama Tambien" was made. Traveling across the high plains desert, we see farming with burros and oxen. Anticipation builds as we near the mountains.

We climb to cooler places. We're stopped for a while by road construction. We stop to buy carved animals made (from wooden branches) by an artisan. Their home is perched on a hillside very steep. Later, we realize there are no flat places in the mountains and farming is so difficult. At 12,000 feet we run the mountains ridge. We eat a meal of those delicious sandwiches made by one of the women (Edith) at the dump neighborhood. We share our extra food with the family whose road-side food stand we were at.

We descend from the cool mountain tops into Candelaria's jungle heat. We marvel at how far the children walk to school on precarious roads.

We leave the small town and travel 45 minutes on bumpy dirt roads, climbing higher to the village. The terrain is as steep as ever on the road with drop-offs.

When we arrived in the village many came running to see us and say hello. We met Juan's family: his mother (Chimi) and grandmother. We get settled in. Bryan took us up a path to look over the Simply Smiles compound and the village of Santa Maria Tepexipana. Later during a tour, the Zapotec people invited us into their home...and we're here to feed them. Juan's Grandma lives in a traditional palm leaf thatched roof home.

Through dinner time and after we get to know the villagers as they eat and visit with us. We go to see where we will get our supplies from the Simply Smiles shed at Pedro's home. On the walk back, the smell of home fires is in the air. The sound of birds too. The children and adults are talking (and I realize I need to learn their language). We feel really welcome here, so we sleep to prepare for tomorrow's work.

- David Shaw

Day Five (5/20)

Today we woke up early. This is because there are mainly adults here. They go to bed at 8 pm and wake up at 5:30 am. We had breakfast of eggs and Jillian's crease-free bacon. Then devotions with Gordon. We got nifty bookmarks and "made this day our prayer". And of all the days of the week we needed those prayers.

Without hesitation we started our day by loading up the F550 with beans, sugar, soap, rice, salt, oil, lollipops and paper goods. We drove the truck up a steep hill where the dispensa will all happen. To keep the day moving we added humor by throwing bags of rice to (or perhaps at) each other. Before lunch we loaded and unloaded the truck three times. We ate then loaded and unloaded the truck once more. By 3 o'clock we unloaded enough food for 2,500 people. We all helped, along with village children, to bags beans and make signs and tickets for the dispensa tomorrow.

Meanwhile, some of the village women began to sort and cook beans for a hot meal to be handed out during the dispensa.

With work complete, Kristen and Bryan took us and the children to a nearby waterfall to rinse off since we don't have enough water to shower. Gordon voluntarily stayed behind to make a good dinner of American Chop Suey which we all enjoyed after the hardest day of work this week. After dinner Bryan and Dave (Graves) played catch through the jungle trees and hills with a glowing orb ball. Unable to realize this own strength, Bryan overthrew the ball, it hit the fence and plopped straight into the village women's 25 gallon pot of beans.

We are still making some tickets, the kids are screaming and playing, the women are still cooking and we are preparing for what is going to be the climax of the week: the dispensa.

- Sarah Magnamo

Days Six and Seven (5/21-22)

On Tuesday, I believe it was, I used the stories of the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walking on the water for morning devotions. In the way Luke tells these stories, the disciples don't understand the feeding of the 5000 right away. It is only after witnessing Jesus walking on the water that "their eyes were opened".

I'm not sure I've ever understood why it took so long for the disciples to comprehend before. But having witnessed a feeding of thousands of hungry people yesterday I now get it. It is almost impossible to comprehend quickly. The experience seems to defy description in words. I will do my best to describe our final days in Santa Maria Tepexipana but it by no means will do it justice. I can only hope that days and weeks of reflection will afford me more eloquent ways to tell the story.

Our morning on Friday began with a hearty meal: some of Jillian's famous bacon and banana pancakes made from fresh Oaxacan bananas. We needed a hearty meal because it would be a long day ahead of us.

The dispensa – the Spanish word used for the food distribution – was of a magnitude I never expected. About an hour before the dispensa was to begin, I had some chore to do down in town. What I found was a sea of people so thick that it was challenging to navigate one's way through. There was a line of people longer than I could see waiting in line to receive their "ficha" (ticket) while all their other family members entertained themselves all throughout the town. Many of these families had walked countless hours to arrive early with hopes they would draw one of the early ficha numbers. You could watch children putting on their shoes as they entered town because the dispensa was an event that warranted one's best attire but their parents wouldn't allow them to wear out their only pair of shoes while they walked miles on the steep mountain paths that lead down to the village. The volume of people and the magnitude of needs was utterly overwhelming.

Bryan, Kristen, Juan and the mission team gathered by the truck for a 9 a.m. opening announcement. Soon afterwards ficha distribution began while we headed off to our work stations. We had prepared 700 fichas for distribution the day before. By my estimation about 550 of them, at one per family, we distributed in the first 20 minutes. All would be given out by morning's end. And we even made an additional 50 later in the day when we realized there would be enough food.

There were essentially two different work projects for our mission team. Up the hill the food distribution occurred. In a big white tent, five to six members of our team distributed a bag of salt, sugar and soap as well as a bottle of oil to each family, plus one kilo of rice and one of beans for "every beating heart". At the end of the line, lollipops were given out and smiles drawn on every hand.

The other major task was to deal with the staging of over 700 families. Our team members had to cue up the families into groups of one hundred by ficha color and number. It was an immense sea of people who did their best to assist us with this task but there were challenges. Some did not know their numbers. All were tired from walking to town and then had to stand waiting in the beating hot sun. And there was a level of anxiety, particular among those with higher numbers, about what would happen if we didn't have enough food to distribute to everyone.

One of the surprises for me was that there were vendors lining the entire staging area. They were selling snacks and drinks to those who waited in line. I suppose it was a brilliant opportunity for those who sell such things. There is no other event which would draw such crowds to town. School (for those who can afford it) had even been cancelled for the day. My reaction to the vendors was mixed however. Part of me was angry that the vendors were taking advantage of the meager resources of a people so needy. Part of me was grateful for some families had to wait in line for eight hours and try as we might at least supply them with water, we could never get enough handed out quick enough.

During the first half of the day, I worked at supporting the rest of our team. I would refill water bottles, cover breaks, communicate messages from person to person, etc. I walked from one end of town to the other many times. It was impossible not to be struck silent by some of the sights I saw. Parents carrying disabled children strapped to their backs. A four year old carrying a two year old up the steep hill that made the most fit among us pant as we'd ascend. Children with distended stomachs and orange hair malnutrition (although Bryan says they see much less of that than six months ago when the dispensas first started). Yet what sticks in my mind the most are the people's eyes. The Zapotec people have the most beautiful big round eyes. Their very souls seem to be reflected in their eyes. There is not one, child or adult, who when I looked in their eyes I would not have lugged every pound of food and worked every minute as hard just to have fed him or her alone.

The afternoon had different work in store for me. The previous day several of the Zapotec villagers had cooked up a wonderful meal of rice, beans and corn tortillas that they served throughout much of the morning of the dispensa. However, their serving size was rather larger and they ran out of both rice and tortillas prior to lunch. So they stopped serving. When we inquired about this they told us that a meal of beans alone would not be beautiful. Bryan responded by telling them that "filling empty stomachs is beautiful". But rather than offending anyone during this cultural incongruity, we took matters into our own hands. Jenn and I cooked up a remaining bag and half of rice in two large pots on our small propane stove and spent the rest of the afternoon serving it. While we were cooking we had families begging to us from the other side of the fence to feed them because they had not eaten all day or in some cases for several days. It was heart-braking to have to tell them that they would have to wait until the ficha number was called and they came through the dispensa. Both of us dreaded the possibility that our two pots of rice and half a pot of beans would not stretch far enough to feed the three hundred plus families left to be served. Miraculously it did, with some rice left over. Sound like a familiar story?

I do have to say the rice Jenn I cooked up was absolutely disgusting. I referred to it as "arroz de gringo". In places it was burnt, in others is mushy paste, and still in others there were uncooked piece of rice. At home, I would have thrown both pots of rice away. I wouldn't have served it and I certainly wouldn't have eaten it. I think to most Americans it would have been considered inedible. But, of course, here there was no choice. Nutrition was nutrition no mater how disgusting it might be. While I felt horrible that we weren't able to serve them something better, I watched people gobble the rice and beans down like it was a God-given blessing...like it was their

only meal that day...which it probably was. Rarely have I felt such a chasm between others realities and my life of privilege.

Even when the dispensa wound down a little after 5 pm, there was still a lot of work to be done. Everything had to be move back to the shed to be stored. And the shed had to be cleaned out as an unwanted resident had moved in. Luckily, Miller was able to play exterminator, taking out a rat with a piece of plywood.

With the sun set and the hardest of the work done we sat down to a wonderful pasta dinner. While we were eating, some of the children were playing with the glow ball Bryan had brought for them. Unfortunately, one throw sent the ball down the side of the hill into the jungle. We chuckled as the kids asked to borrow our flashlights so they could go look for the “palota santa” – “the holy ball”. Luckily, the treasure was recovered.

We wound down our long day with some conversation, a song by Kristen and a quiet communion service shared with our Zapotec friends. Oh, yes, and a rousing round of “Happy Birthday” sung to Fran.

This morning we were up and out early. Vans loaded and goodbyes said by 6:30 a.m. The drive between Santa Maria Tepexipana and Huatulco (where our departure airport was located) was again another set of breathtaking mountain roads. I have to say as physically and emotional exhausting as some of the work has been this week, I have found the views we have seen of God’s creation during the drives to be renewing many times over.

Kristen was scheduled on a flight a few hours earlier than the rest of us, so we went to both cool off and rinse off in the waters of the Pacific Ocean for a couple hours.

Now we find ourselves on our flights traveling back home. We are ready for our own beds, refrigerators, computers, toilet seats...and all the other luxuries with which we’ve become accustomed. And yet I think each of us in our own way is searching for the words to share our experiences with our families and friends. I know I am feeling numb to the whole thing and yet I find I’m weepy as I write this. Hopefully with time our eyes will be opened. All I know how to say right now is that yesterday 2,529 hungry were fed for a month and we got to witness that miracle.

- Gordon