

True North Brings Healthcare to Guatemala's “Forgotten People”

Imagine navigating narrow streams by dugout canoe, then hiking several hours on unmarked trails through dense Guatemalan tropical forests with a heavy backpack of medical supplies. When you and your team finally reach your destination, it is a clearing with a few simple wooden huts and a cinder block school. A crowd of adults and children patiently waits in the morning light. Some people live in the village and others have walked for hours to be there. They are the indigenous Mayan people of the Rio Dulce region, the “forgotten people,” displaced by decades of civil war. Today you’ll be providing medical care for them in a makeshift clinic with a dirt floor and thatched roof. For these isolated villagers, these visits a few times each year are the only formal medical care they receive.

FOUND HISTRUENORTH

Dentist Alan Barber of Leawood, Kansas never tires of these experiences in Guatemala. Immediately after returning from his first medical trip to Belize in 2000, he founded and self-funded True North Missions as a non-profit organization to provide medical care to underserved peoples in Central America. This is no part-time hobby. Within four years, Dr. Barber had developed and completed a plan to transition away from his dental practice to devote full-time effort to True North Missions.

His first medical trip almost never happened. It took a lot of coaxing to get Dr. Barber to join the first trip, but now he can’t stop returning, organizing up to six trips each year. In 1998, a physician



colleague invited Dr. Barber to join him on a trip, but Barber declined, feeling he was too busy to take time away from his general dentistry practice in Kirksville, Missouri. In 1999, he declined again. In 2000, Barber finally relented to his friend’s third request, and by the end of the first day of clinic, knew he had found the next chapter of his life. He recalls, “Seeing the smiles on the faces of the villagers, especially the kids, lifted the ‘fog’ for me.” The experience reminded him of the pleasure he takes in serving others, and he speaks of it often. “I call it the ‘fog,’ the illusion of everyday distractions that aren’t really that important, and it disappeared for me on that very first trip.”

OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Dressed comfortably in blue jeans and athletic shoes, Dr. Barber comes across as a relaxed Midwesterner. His friendly manner belies a laser focus on constantly improving True North’s operations to be as effective as possible. In 2006, the organization began serving the Rio Dulce region exclusively, which had even more dire medical shortages than Belize did. “That was a specific area I identified as the most underserved in Central America where I thought we could do the most good,” he says. Through trial and error, Dr. Barber developed and standardized best practices that would allow his teams to accomplish the most with their limited resources.



Dr. Alan Barber

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Dr. Alan Barber, Founder
True North Missions



To stretch their dollars, small teams of six volunteer health care providers pay for their own flights and personal costs. Partnerships with “sending organizations” such as residency programs, medical schools and hospitals help to gather the teams. Though he receives many requests from helpful volunteers who’d like to come along, Dr. Barber requires that all team members must be doctors, nurses, medical and dental students. In six visits per year, True North Missions rotates through 18 villages and an orphanage on multiple stops, and every spot counts.

In a region with few paved roads, the river is the best passage. For safety, Dr Barber has provided a boat for team members to sleep on each night and use motorized canoes to maneuver up the smaller tributaries to trailheads to then hike to a village. “The health and safety of my volunteers is paramount, so I want to get them in and out of a village and back to the boat each evening before nightfall,” he notes.

The experience is transformative for the volunteers who go. Ann Marie Patterson, a pediatric resident in Greenville, South Carolina, is planning her second trip, saying, “It really was an awesome experience. The villagers are so grateful and it’s so rewarding to see the smiles on the kids’ faces.”

DISEASES OF POVERTY

While providing primary healthcare to the Mayan Indian children and their families in the Rio Dulce Region, one of the biggest opportunities is treating diseases that could be easily prevented. “In the past few years, I’ve learned a lot about the diseases of poverty,” says Dr. Barber. “Intestinal worms, scabies, and giardia – they are endemic in rural Guatemala. And they can be treated for pennies a day, if patients can just get regular care.”

Teams make every attempt to treat villagers on the spot, but more complex cases are transported into the city or to the US. “We help everyone we can, period!” emphasizes Dr. Barber proudly.

DEEP RELATIONSHIPS

While many organizations work in established clinics in population centers, True North’s ability and willingness to travel to some of the most remote areas of Guatemala distinguishes the group. True North helps administer World Health Organization’s (WHO) programs such as immunizations, women’s health and a country wide de-worming project. “The government simply doesn’t have, or doesn’t allot, the resources to the remote Mayan villages. Sometimes we end up donating supplies and fuel to government health workers who wouldn’t be able to gas up their boats, otherwise,” points out Dr. Barber. Many government and WHO programs are inconsistent at best. “It’s more a matter of the government health workers joining us than the other way around,” he observes.

Developing a local network has been key to True North’s success. “Some of our Mayan dialect translators have been with us for years, and they thoroughly understand our process. We’ve also learned to send runners up the trails ahead of us, so that the locals have a few days advance notice for our clinic dates. This maximizes the number of people we can treat. We’ve had patients walk eight hours round trip to a clinic site just to see us.”

“The defining moment for me is being in a village and taking care of children that are happy and smiling, knowing that the scabies and intestinal worms that were afflicting them two months ago are gone.” That’s what keeps me coming back,” says Dr. Barber with a smile.



“We help everyone we can, period!”

Dr. Alan Barber, Founder
True North Missions

FAST FACTS

Founded in 2000

Six trips each year, responsible for primary health care in 22 villages in Rio Dulce Region of Guatemala

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