Delivering the gift of sight in Honduras

When a friend asked Joyce Tolle to go on a medical mission to Honduras, the McPherson, KS Branch 1171 letter carrier didn’t think she had any useful skills to offer.

“What am I going to be able to do?” Tolle asked. “I’m not qualified like those doctors and nurses and pharmacists. But I found out all you really need is a willing heart.”

The friend had asked Tolle several times to go on the Honduras trip and, nearing retirement age, Tolle finally said yes. “I’m still walking on my route as a city carrier, and I thought if I wait until I can’t walk, I won’t be able to do this,” she said.

Tolle went on the trip, sponsored by the Florida-based non-profit Catholic group Friends of the Missions, in February and she found just as much fulfillment there as the medical professionals. “I decided to do whatever they needed me to do,” she said. “I ended up giving out reading glasses.”

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. Nearly two-thirds of its residents live in poverty, many of them in isolated villages far from access to medical care or even to simple eyewear.

Tolle joined 19 volunteer medical professionals—doctors, nurses, pharmacists and a dentist—to provide care for Hondurans who couldn’t afford or had little access to medical, dental or vision care. Traveling from village to village with the medical staff, Tolle set up a table in each village outdoors where there was enough light to test the glasses while the doctors and nurses saw patients in schools and other public buildings. In just over a week, the mission served more than 2,500 patients in rural villages across the country, and Tolle distributed more than 1,000 pairs of glasses.

Tolle helped Hondurans with poor eyesight try on different glasses, which were donated by pharmacies and other stores in the United States, until they found a pair that worked for them. One at a time, people with vision problems attempted to read a Bible verse in Spanish, trying different glasses until the words were clear.

Even those who were illiterate—one in every four—wanted glasses to wear for tasks such as threading a needle or removing a splinter. The crowds that came looking for help demonstrated the extent of the unmet medical needs in Honduras. “One day, we had to close the gates before noon because there were already more than 800 people waiting to be helped,” she said.

Though she relied a little on her high school Spanish, Tolle needed an interpreter. Like Tolle, her interpreter, George, was making the best of his skills—in his case, because he was blind. George was essential to explaining to Hondurans how to choose the right glasses, Tolle said, and to use the donated glasses properly.

Glasses weren’t the only thing Tolle delivered to the Hondurans. When she wasn’t distributing eyeglasses, Tolle helped the medical staff however she could—for example, by counting out pills for the pharmacy. And she brought special treats for children such as crayons, coloring books and clothing, along with Fruit Loops breakfast cereal—a favorite among Honduran children.

Tolle said she learned much about how Hondurans live, like the wages a Honduran man in a rural village can earn for a day’s work in sugar cane fields. “It could buy me one simple meal of vegetables, rice, beans, goat cheese and tortillas,” she said. “But he’ll never be able to take his family to eat in a restaurant.

“It was a very emotional trip, but you realized that every day we have is precious,” Tolle said. “I knew that before, but this made it tangible.”

She said more Americans should travel to countries like Honduras to gain perspective on how fortunate we are. “I think anyone who is upset about life in the U.S. should go out of the country and see how most of the world lives,” she said. “They’ll understand the opportunities we have, and that we’re so abundantly blessed here.”

Tolle, a carrier for 25 years, brought the good feelings from her mission back to her route in Kansas. “I realized that every person is made by God and deserves respect,” she said, “and I could give the people on my route, everyone I see, some value by giving them attention and service. That’s what we should do; we’re the Postal Service. “God doesn’t give us everything we need so we can just sit around,” she said. “God expects us to live dangerously.”

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