

## Dan Nordman in Guatemala, 1981

By Mike Clifton, editor The Paper, April, 22, 1981

"To see the people's eyes light up when they get something they know is going to help them...to see little kids take some of the foulest-tasting medicine you can imagine, and smile because they know it's going to help...these were some of the greatest rewards."

The speaker is Dan Nordman, R.R. 1 Roann, a junior in pre-med at Manchester College.

The place was Guatemala.

The occasion was "the most educational experience I've had," according to Nordman.

In January, Nordman and seven other Manchester College students, including Rex Flenar, Laketon, the only two Hoosier students on the trip, served as part of a medical visitation team sent to Guatemala.

The mission of the group, supervised by Dr. Edward Miller, Manchester College professor of chemistry, was to visit remote villages to offer much needed medical and dental assistance.

"Our objectives were to give our pre-med students at Manchester some exposure in medical work in action and to show them another country and way of life," according to Dr. Miller.

"I gained only good," says Nordman. "It improved my desire to become a physician and showed me the power of the physician to sustain life in some cases. To become a doctor is my way of doing my part to help people and follow Christ's wishes."

During the two weeks of on-site work in six "clinics," the medical team, including two doctors from Ohio, treated more than 700 patients. Some villagers saw both the doctor and the dentist and the Manchester students distributed 1,000 toothbrushes and demonstrated proper brushing techniques. Dr. Richard Myers, DDS, and his student assistants treated 188 patients with dental problems, resulting in 407 extractions. Approximately 45 people were fitted with eyeglasses.

"In one town," Nordman said, "we found the clinic in a small building where an elderly gentleman with no formal training was the doctor. He treated people as he knew how, but he had a dental chair, a sophisticated piece of equipment for that area. It was the only equipment we found on the rest of the trip."

Only two of the group spoke Spanish, so interpretation was a problem in some cases, Nordman explained. "We'd have the questions asked in Spanish for us, about their names, past history, etc., then three students would take the patient to the doctor and he would discuss what he was doing as far as treatment."

"We were overwhelmed by people seeking medical help," said Dr. Miller. "Some of the villages had not had a doctor in more than six months"

"Some of the people from the Episcopal Church in Guatemala had organized the trip from that end," said Nordman, "and they really had it planned...our itinerary, transportation, everything. We flew down from Indianapolis, but from Guatemala City on it was rugged"

According to Nordman the trip into the interior of the country was by bus, “which are 3<sup>rd</sup> class at best...a lot of trucks, few cars, narrow roads and passing on blind curves.”

All of the medicine, \$3,000 worth, one-third purchased and two-thirds donated, was taken with them. “The customs people when we landed opened and inspected every box of supplies we had, but they totally ignored our personal luggage,” Nordman smiles.

After the first village, Mariscos, all travel was by large motorized dugout canoes on Lake Izabal to neighboring communities. “All of the other villages had no medical setup at all, says Nordman. “On several occasions the dental chair was a regular chair tipped backward against a post. The dentist used a battery-powered head-band `miner’s` lamp for his work.”

The weather was hot, Nordman said. “It was in the 80’s every day and we had to find shelter in which to work. In some cases we used houses, sometimes small sheds, anyplace that had a roof.”

According to Dr. Miller and Nordman, “the people were warm and friendly everywhere. In one village they had only had treatment from a missionary who used herbs and spices for medicine. We slept on wooden school benches, cement floors and in churches and ate meals in thatch-roofed, dirt-floored homes with various types of animals roaming around.”

The typical day began at 7 am and ended about 4:30 or 5 pm. “We turned no one away. We lived with the people, ate with them and slept in their houses...we couldn’t fail to help them,” Nordman said.

“I learned two main things on the trip,” Nordman said. “There is a unity to all mankind. It struck me that when you treat people, little children, dirty, with distended bellies from lack of protein and no sanitation, cooking over open fires... we are all equal. In God’s eyes we are all the same.”

Nordman continued “It didn’t matter that they didn’t have what we have. They have never had what we have, so they know no other way. As a result they are a very happy people. They are content with their lives. To them, and to God, we are equal. It doesn’t matter what `worldly` advantage we may have.”

Secondly, Nordman said, “I learned to have a great appreciation for our country and for what we have. We were in Guatemala when Reagan was inaugurated and when the hostages were released, and we really missed the United States.”

There were a lot of good things about the trip, and a lot of frustrations. I realized what a tremendous tool medicine is to help people,” Nordman said.

“The people there suffer from a tremendous lack of iron and protein. We gave them tablets to help, but it was, at best, only a temporary help before the medicine ran out and they went back to their old ways.

“It was like stepping back into history, before `wonder drugs.` A broken bone there can be fatal,” Nordman said.

I remember one instance very well,” he said after a slight pause. “We had a storm at night and it was damp, really humid. A little girl in the next village we were to visit had a cold, but because of the weather it developed into pneumonia and about five hours before we arrived she died. If we had arrived just one day

earlier we could have saved her, I know we could...they built her coffin right in front of the shack where we set up the clinic..."

"You have to justify what we did by saying `we did good for ourselves` but I don't know how much good we did for the people, except give them some hope that someday they may have the drugs available when they need them"

All aid at present is through visiting missionaries and through the churches in the country, Nordman said. "The government doesn't do anything in this area.

Nordman, as did everyone else on the trip, paid his own way on the trip, about \$750. "But it was a great experience and affirmed my decision to become a doctor. "I get very excited as the possibility of becoming a doctor gets closer," he said.

"I presently work in a nursing home part-time, and see people there who have lived a good life, and then remember what I saw on the trip and realize so many people still need help. I've wanted to be a doctor since junior high school, and I'm glad to have the opportunity to work toward it."

After Manchester College Nordman plans to attend Indiana University Medical School, and Manchester College now plans to make the trips to Guatemala yearly, "until the political situation forbids our visits," according to Nordman.

Dr. Miller notes that he has received approval for a similar course in January, 1982, but adds "we have not selected a site as yet, but wherever it is we will arrive at it with experience working for us."