

Dean Rust in Viajama, 1984

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Dr. Dean Rust '68 really didn't know what to expect when he stepped off the plane in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, with boxes of medical supplies under his arm. His comfortable modern dental office in Strasburg, Pennsylvania, was 1200 miles away, and he was headed to less than perfect medical facilities in a small village on this Caribbean island.

He was not alone. With him at the airport that night were 11 other North Americans, all of whom had two common links---a willingness to serve others and a kinship to Manchester College.

Manchester College Professor Dr. Edward Miller '56 had asked Rust and the others to accompany him on a college January Term medical practicum to Viajama, Dominican Republic, a village with no electricity, running water or modern conveniences. Along with Rust, a dentist, and his wife Shirley Royer Rust '69x, was Dr. Donald Parker '56, an Akron, Ohio, physician, his wife Joyce Musselman Parker '59x, and seven Manchester College students.

This was the fourth medical practicum course organized and directed by Dr. Miller, chair of the pre-medical advisory committee at Manchester College. In previous years the January class had been located in rural Guatemala, Panama and Honduras, always in areas of great need for both trained medical personnel and supplies.

Dr. Miller explained that the objectives of the course include the opportunity for students to work directly with a physician and dentist interacting with patients of all ages and a great variety of complaints; to experience the culture of a developing country and see first-hand how most of the world's people live; to experience being a minority with the frustrations of inadequate language skills and misunderstandings of cultural assumptions; to exist for a short time with the layers of comfort and luxury peeled away leaving a new appreciation for a comfortable bed, hot shower, safe drinking water and green salads, and adequate sanitary conditions; and to share themselves and their skills with the 2000 people of the village of Viajama. In Viajama, there is a clinic with few supplies and, at times, a doctor.

"The health care system in the Dominican Republic is traditional with an attempt, through mandatory rural clinic service of all graduating medical interns, to provide at least basic care in most of the small villages," Dr. Parker explained. The budgeted \$250 medication and supply allowance for more than 2000 people left little for the young doctor in Viajama to work with.

“When we arrived with our donated drugs and supplies, the little medicine cupboard in the clinic was soon overflowing. We were able to share much needed antibiotics and other drugs with neighboring village clinics.” He added.

In May 1983, leaders of the church in Viajama were contacted by Karen Gordon Calderon '71 of the World Ministries Commission, Church of the Brethren. Dr. Miller then recruited the Rusts and Parkers, and coordinated the securing of medical supplies to treat the many people who would be seen in the two weeks at the village clinic. Nearly \$5000 retail value of medical supplies donated by the Interchurch Medical Assistance through Church World Service, pharmaceutical houses or purchased with monetary gifts from churches, service clubs and individuals were collected for the project.

Personnel to staff the clinic were also needed. Six MC students---Marcia Copp '84, Brian Harley '85, Jasmine Gabriel '84, Kyle Strode '86, Mike Miller '85 and Kandi Rumble '86---plus 1983 graduate Joe Houmard---joined Dr. Miller, the Rusts and Parkers for the medical practicum trip. About 30 Manchester students have participated in the learning/serving experiences Dr. Miller said.

“With the medical supplies donated by various sources, the only expenses we had as individuals were for travel and food.” Dr. Miller explained.

Loaded with supplies and personal luggage, the 12-person Manchester medical delegation departed from Fort Wayne's (Indiana) Baer Field Airport early December 30. After several air flights and a four-hour bus trip, the group reached Viajama.

Viajama is poverty stricken in many ways. Men and boys ride or walk into the mountains to pick coffee for a few pesos a day; children play barefoot in the dirt streets among chickens and goats. The schools are open only a few months of the year. Basic supplies are often unobtainable. One of the town's few water pumps was out of commission for weeks because a replacement for the broken pump handle was unavailable.

Yet, there was a certain beauty about this little isolated village that impressed its North American visitors when they arrived that December night. It was quiet; the tin roofs of the village houses glistened in the star light. “The stars were so bright” recalled Shirley Rust, “we stood in amazement just looking at the sky.”

And how friendly the people were!

“People treated us like kings,” Shirley Rust said. “They were so warm, so hospitable. They wanted to be with us so much, and hold our hands. We really seemed to be special to them.”

The medical team did become very special to the villagers.

Within a day or so, the clinic was organized. Set up in a two-room house, a wooden rocking chair served as a dental chair, with logs underneath the front of the of the legs to make it recline. The improvised head rest consisted of cotton stuffed into a plastic bag.

“The only problem was, we couldn’t elevate it,” laughs Dr. Rust, “but it was a great chair.” A battery powered spelunker’s light was hand-held by the student assistants. Rust and his student volunteers quickly found their improvised chair would be continuously occupied.

“It was the first time a dentist had ever been to the village,” says Dr. Rust. Everybody who came to us had acute dental illness.”

Since there was no electricity in the village to permit even ordinary dental procedures, Dr. Rust soon found himself running a tooth-pulling operation. “I only did extractions,” he said. “We pulled 500 teeth during those two weeks. The average patient had three or four badly decayed teeth. Most patients wanted more teeth removed than we could handle.” The dentist admitted he used plenty of pain killers to ease the shock of the extractions.

Dr. Rust, who speaks only a few words of Spanish, found little need to communicate verbally in his work. “Once my patients opened their mouths, I could see what their problems were.”

People with medical problems waited on the other side of the metal-roofed clinic. They were eager to see the “North American doctor”---Dr. Parker. Most of the villagers suffered from parasites, caused by unsanitary conditions in the village. During the two weeks, over 800 persons, about half the village population, were treated for parasites.

The Manchester medical team was surprised to discover a high incidence of hypertension. Joyce Parker set up a blood pressure screening program and identified many Viajamans needing medication for high blood pressure.

“We have seen some unusual medical conditions during January trips,” Dr. Miller said. “There have been cases of leprosy, puncture wounds, skin/scalp infections, intestinal parasites, severe anemia and malnutrition.”

“No matter how limited the treatment or short the examination, invariably we were thanked sincerely by a satisfied person leaving the clinic,” Dr. Parker related. Unfortunately he knew there would be few refills for the medication dispensed by the Manchester College team. All they could offer was treatment on a limited scope he said.

Not all the medical care was handled by the licensed professionals. Students, Shirley Rust, Joyce Parker and Dr. Miller helped with routine examinations and extractions, dispensed

medication and taught preventive health care. The demonstration of tooth brushing was one of the bigger projects and the best teaching method was by example.

Over 1000 tooth brushes were distributed to the villagers, many of whom had never seen such a device. Along with the tooth brushes came lessons in brushing. In addition, every morning and night the MC team would stand outside of the school where they were staying and brush their teeth in public. Shirley Rust recalled later seeing kids standing outside their houses brushing their teeth, imitating the Americans. The local children were taught to brush with bicarbonate of soda, if available, or at least with salt.

Work at the clinic was shared and rotated among the students. They worked with the doctors, with each other and one-on-one with people visiting the clinic. Persons assisting Dr. Rust learned to administer pain killers and pull teeth. Each had the chance to work in all areas of the clinic operation with some individual talents focused in special areas. For example, both Strode and Hou7mard, knowledgeable in Spanish, translated for Dr. Rust. Dr. Parker, who had served in a hospital at Castaner, Puerto Rico, knows Spanish well. Most of the students maintained a journal of their experiences.

Outside of the 8 am to 4 pm clinic time, the Manchester medical team lived the life of a native Viajaman. The 12 “camped” in the elementary school house while the children were enjoying holiday break. Beds consisted of air mattresses and sleeping bags on the cement floor. Food was purchased from the general store in the village and local markets. Baths were taken in the river. Houmard and Strode even gave English lessons to their Viajaman friend Miguel.

The villagers also helped us by preparing our meals. The seasonings were different than we were used to,” Strode recalled. “We ate a lot of chicken, fried bananas, oranges, corn fritters and rice. Once we even had goat meat!” He added that it took everyone a little time to get used to drinking water treated with iodine.

As rewarding as the weeks in Viajama were in terms of meeting the medical and dental needs of the underprivileged village, Dr. Rust said the enormity of the need for medical care was almost overwhelming.

“The sad thing about the whole program was the inability to treat more patients per day,” Dr. rust explained. After opening the clinic in the morning, Dr. Parker and the resident national doctor treated 35 to 40 people a day, the number allowed into the clinic by a ticket system supervised by a Dominican social worker. Dr. Rust said the MC group could have taken three dentists to Viajama and still not have gotten to the end of the line of those villagers with dental disease of emergency nature.

Dean Rust would like to return to Viajama, possibly next year, to continue the work. There's one memory of his experience that haunts him---the memory of villagers who waited in line, but never got to sit in his chair. "What was really difficult was the very last day, they knew that when we were finished, that was it. That was a difficult day."

The days may have been difficult, but they were also rewarding.

"The trip was valuable for me because I was actually doing something to help someone else. The whole trip was like that," Strode said. The soon-to-be junior's experience in Viajama helped finalize his career decision: to enter international social services (BVS, Peace Corps) in a Latin American country.

"In a very philosophical, yet practical sense, our travel to the Dominican Republic changed our visions," Joyce Parker said. "We ate the food of their country, spoke varying degrees of their language, bathed in their river, played with their children, shopped in their stores and were with them in their worship. We experienced the Vijaman hospitality and felt a little of the difficulty in getting things accomplished in their community," she added.

Don Parker considered the time and effort spent a "priceless investment" in cross-cultural understanding and personal discovery of how one relates and copes with living in a totally different environment. "I have observed that the experience and discovery for the students is often maturing and has a positive effect on their understanding and image of themselves and the world," Parker said. He also found this to be no less true for himself.

"We brought home more than we left," Shirley Rust said. "The Vijamans were the most warm, loving, appreciative people we've ever met." The experience also taught her how valuable the times are when people can tear down walls between different cultures.

"Experiences like ours," she wrote later to a friend, "break down the barriers to peace that we build as nations. If only nations could do the same and come together for the common goal of serving others, as God wishes us to do."

For nearly three weeks in a little village in the Dominican Republic, those barriers were broken down, and people from both cultures benefited.