

Paul Fry-Miller in Mulukukú, 1996

Stint in Nicaragua helps city medic value underrated comforts of home, by James Ross, JG, Feb. 5, 1996

Paul Fry-Miller is rested after his trip to rural Nicaragua, but he doesn't want to fully recover from the experience.

"I shouldn't go back to making all of the same assumptions I did before," he said.

The three weeks he spent giving medical treatment to Nicaraguans forced him to challenge the assumptions he had about the availability of things such as food.

"Being around people that are poor changes your assumption of what you take for granted," he said.

Fry-Miller and his son, Eric, were part of a group organized by Manchester College to go to the South American [actually, Central American] country to give medical care to residents.

The contingent included doctors, nurses and dentists. Fry-Miller was the only physician's assistant. Fry-Miller's employer, Caylor-Nickel Medical Center in Bluffton, allowed him to earn continuing education credit for the trip. This is the fourth year Manchester College has offered the medical practicum during the January term. [4th to Mulukukú, Nicaragua, but 14th Medical Practicum] Like Eric, other students assisted in the medical and dental clinics and in the pharmacy.

Eric, 16, took time off from classes at South Side High School, where he is a sophomore. Fort Wayne resident Joshua Kline, a pre-medicine major at Manchester College, also was part of the entourage. "I thought it would be an interesting experience," Eric said.

The group of 28 left Fort Wayne on Jan. 2 and flew into Managua, Nicaragua. They returned Jan. 24

After two days of orientation in Managua---studying sites, history and politics of the area---the group rode 12 hours on the back of a produce truck to get to the small town of Mulukukú. The town, where many people settled after war, has about 4,000 residents.

The annual visit offers many Nicaraguan residents their only chance for medical care beyond that offered by a nurse, Fry-Miller said.

Although high-quality health care is available to private-paying citizens in areas like Managua, treatment is often unavailable for the poor.

In Managua, the Manchester College group stayed in a guesthouse with cold showers and windows that lacked screens---what the team considered pretty Spartan conditions.

"By the time we got back there, we felt like it was the Ritz," Fry-Miller said.

In Mulukukú, the group stayed in a make-shift dormitory assembled in a school built by a women's cooperative. There was no running water.

In Managua, it was not uncommon to see \$30,000 sport-utility vehicle, and "right next to it would be a bus literally busting out with people," he said.

But what troubled him most was seeing patients, both children and adults, with conditions that could be avoided through vaccinations and other precautions.

Fry-Miller said the group treated 1,100 patients in the medical and dental clinics. Three fourths were children, most of whom suffered from malaria, intestinal parasites or both.

It was difficult knowing we were treating only temporarily conditions like malaria and intestinal parasites because the conditions that caused those are not going to go away," he said.

Skin infections, thyroid disease, respiratory illnesses and malnutrition also were common, he said. Fry-Miller talked about a child who became deaf because of a high temperature caused by measles. He recounted telling a mother that malnourishment and other ailments would keep her lame child from ever walking on his own.

Treating patients was even more difficult because routine tests were unavailable, even though a pathologist from Managua was part of the group.

By comparison, workers at Matthew 25 Health and Dental Clinic, where Fry-Miller volunteers, always find a way to get needed tests done, he said. But in Mulukukú, a patient who came in coughing up blood and complaining of symptoms associated with tuberculosis could not get an X-ray. "You make your best guess and you try to treat them in a way that you think will be helpful and you try to avoid harm," Fry-Miller said.

Patients showed their appreciation by paying for medical services with eggs, fruit and even a chicken.

He said the experience make him appreciate comforts like hot showers and has made him feel guilty for wasting water.

Added comment: Although high-quality health care is available to private-paying citizens in areas like Managua, treatment is often unavailable for the poor. And even though Mulukukú has a government-run clinic, only one doctor runs the facility, which serves a broad region, Fry-Miller said.