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## St. Pat's group works in Guatemalan village

### Hudson Star-Observer Published Friday, February 13, 2009

"I could never be this useful back home," said college student Ryan Bates, describing a highlight of his Guatemalan trip Jan. 17 to 25.

He was part of a team of six parishioners from St. Patrick Catholic Church on a medical mission to their sister parish of San Jose de Yalpemech, north of Coban in the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala.

The group included Dr. Greg Young and his 9-year-old son, Isaac, nurse Nancy Stinnett, Claire Zajac, Marybeth Lorbiecki Mataya and Ryan Bates.

The roads they used to reach the parish were as narrow and twisty as the



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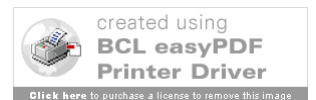
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Six parishioners from St. Patrick Catholic Church went to Guatemala on a medical mission trip. The group included, from left, Claire Zajac, Marybeth Lorbiecki Mataya, Nancy Stinnett, Ryan Bates, Isaac Young and team leader Dr. Greg Young. Submitted photo

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barbed wire that topped fences and gates. It took a day and a half (including the initial two flights) to reach the mission because one does not travel on Guatemalan roads at night.

“Thankfully, we were hosted on our journeys to and from the mission by Guatemala attorney Jose Eugenio and his wife, Mary Carmen,” said Mataya. “Jose had been a high-school exchange student in Baldwin.”

At the white cement mission, they were greeted by Sister Juanita (Joannes) Klas, the mission’s founder and winner of a United Nation’s prize for her refugee work. She first encountered the members of the San Jose community when they were living in a Honduras refugee camp, having escaped the violence of the Guatemalan military against them and their villages during the 1980s and ’90s.


“When villagers were allowed to return to Guatemala and buy some land in the Alta Verapaz, Sister Juanita accompanied them and has served them as a spiritual nurturer, educator and friend since 1982,” Mataya said. “The community is a mixed neighborhood of people who speak Spanish and those who speak Quechi, one of many Mayan languages.”

San Jose Catholic Church is central to most everything going on, from medical care to high school classes. The mission house has a loudspeaker to announce community happenings, clinic hours, gatherings and to alert a family that they have a phone call at the parish house since few homes have telephone lines and cell phones are beyond most residents. The parish car is used like an ambulance to get people to the hospitals in distant towns or like a bus, giving rides to people when anyone is going to town.

“Every penny we have sent down here — not dollar, but penny — has made an enormous difference for the people here,” said Stinnett. “That was a key lesson for the group, to see what Sister Juanita and the sister parish partnership had accomplished over the 10 years of the relationship, including the residents’ electricity lines, the parish pick-up truck/vehicle and its maintenance and tires, roofs on the parish house and church, a chicken project, cattl project, needed school and medical supplies, etc.

The St. Patrick parish stipend for the nuns also supports families, because they pay for parish members to make tortillas, drive parishioners, work at the clinic, help with odd jobs, etc. The next parish plan is to help 204 families secure their land titles and ensure that all families have a rainwater catcher for clean water to drink.

The Guatemalan government, too, has been working in partnership with international aid

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agencies to improve the access to education, housing, water and health care.

“It’s so clear to me now that money put into development projects in poor countries is never a waste or fruitless effort,” said Mataya. “We know we can’t alleviate their poverty overnight or in a year or in 10 years, but we can let people know they matter and ease some worries, changing things one piece at a time.”

She said people’s homes are very simple — either a thatched roof hut with a dirt floor separated with curtained walls, or two cement rooms with a tin roof and a former stick hut used for cooking. They do not have running water. Toilets are latrines.

Some have outdoor cement sinks called pilas, used for catching rainwater. Others carry water from the stream and do their wash there. Most grind corn for tortillas twice a day and eat a tortilla or two for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

The Quechi people plant and harvest each other’s fields together, and at these events, they have a party, as well as on saints’ days and other community events. If there is the slaughtering of cow or pig, the Quechi people have a party, each person receiving one piece of meat and a kind of doggie bag — two pieces of meat wrapped in a banana peel for their family members to share. Members of the St. Patrick group were invited to a parish girl’s quinceanera, or special 15th birthday party, where they were fed first as honored guests and given a stewed drumstick in a vegetable gravy — with corn tortillas.

“It took a few days for the people to start to get to know the team members and vice versa,” Mataya said. “By the end of the week, the team was not working for the people but with them, alongside Sister Juanita and her colleagues — Sister Maria who was studying to be a nurse and overseeing the clinic, and Sister Elaina who taught at the elementary school.”

Under the direction of Dr. Young and Isaac, who had visited San Jose before, the team cleaned, organized and restocked the parish medical clinic, cared for approximately 150 patients and fitted 40 people with eyeglasses and others with sunglasses; made home medical visits; checked out the parish library and observed the voracious hunger for reading; attended the monthly parish Mass in both Spanish and Quechi; taught a week class in English to a high school group; helped severely malnourished children and families with food and vitamins.

“Whenever I travel I look for similarities and differences in cultures and what people want from life,” said Zajac. “There are definite differences between life in Hudson and living in rural village in the remote north of Guatemala. But I was struck by the similarities I observed by being their guest for a week.



“These humble people want the same things I do: a strong faith life for their families, proper food, education and health care for their community and an opportunity to work to support themselves and assist others. I learned so much from them about universal values and what is really important in life.”



Dr. Gregory Young visits a home health facility in the San Jose neighborhood of Yalpemech. Submitted photo

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