

The Character of Service

The character of each brigade team that travels here to shoulder with us is unique. Some of them are much more seasoned than others and they know what to expect. Others are new to the game and they can be timid and uncertain. The seasoned groups are generally not as much work for us, but frankly they can also be a bit demanding. The newer groups are very open to direction, but, sometimes unable to be initiating, they require a great deal of attention. Sometimes the individuals on a team are overly fearfully, but others might be over confident. When we pay proper attention to a group's character, we can help them process their emotional states such that they can feel at ease and focus on the work they have come to accomplish. This is the nature of what it means to be present to another culture, to be challenged by another language. It can be a transformative experience, but it takes patience and understanding on our part as leaders as well as on the part of the participants. We find that almost always this happens, but sometimes we have to work at it harder than at other times.



We didn't know what to expect with the Buffalo School of Medicine that recently visited us for a week throughout the southern territories of Santa Lucia, Magdalena, and San Antonio. The Buffalo School of Pharmacy had visited us last year, and we thought of this group as returning. That was not the case at all as the School of Medicine is completely independent of the Pharmacy School. Being a new brigade group then, we expected that they would be timid, even a bit insecure. Our preconceived notions sometimes fail as with Buffalo who were anything but timid. The first year med-students planned out their medical mission trip and they did an excellent job in preparation. They researched the type of organization with which they wanted to involve themselves. Patrick, who had long-term experience in Mexico and Peru, and who was competent in his Spanish, wanted an organization that was providing regular health care and invested in a sustainable model of service. He and his team did not want to "parachute in" to provide health care that would have little or no follow-up care. They found Shoulder to Shoulder to meet their criteria and they studied the organization. When they got here, their questions were intelligent, insightful, and well related to the work they'd be doing. They were a good three steps ahead of first-time brigades and they hit the ground running.



We were fortunate to spend some time with them on their first night and next morning in our main clinic in Santa Lucia where they would be housed for the week. We had a special treat on their first night as it corresponded with Ever Bonilla's, our Brigade Coordinator, birthday. Cake and coke is a time honored Honduran birthday tradition, as is the honored guest getting to wear some of the cake's

ingredients. The Buffalo students, residents, and faculty had no trouble joining into the celebration. We met up with them again about mid week in the small, isolated community of Las Marias, Magdalena. They had no trouble joining in here, either. Often at a field medical site one can sense a certain disconnect between the patients and the visiting team. It is to be expected in an environment of such cultural diversity. The people are always well served and tremendously grateful, but still a palpable feeling of hesitancy and awkwardness is in the air. This was not the case at Las Marias with the Buffalo team. There was a sense of belonging, order, and flow that carried a sense of relaxation and confidence. There were a whole group of kids there, who are sometimes forgotten. But today they were being treated to chasing soap bubbles, having stickers attached to their shirts, receiving toothbrushes, and then happily being medically examined. The Medical Students were seeing the patients and then consulting with the doctors. There was a grace of movement in the whole process.



Throughout the week, the Buffalo team met with local doctors, nurses, medical professionals, and health promoters. They took overnight shifts for our emergency department at Santa Lucia. The conversations, the professional sharing, the willingness to be invested was again key to a feeling of belonging. It is a tremendous thing to offer service for people who are recognized as having need. But leaving our service there, simply responding to need, is a one way-street for which there is no way to return. Seeing people for who they are beyond their need, recognizing the dignity of their lives, and valuing their cultural experience as potentially enriching your own, this is service that is empowering. It takes so much more than specialized expertise and talent. It takes humility, commitment, and grace. The gratitude it generates for all who are involved is life enduring.



I assumed a particular character for the Buffalo brigade team based on my bias. How happy I was to be wrong. Whereas I thought it was my job to lead them by the hand through their challenging experience, their embrace of the people they came to serve taught me a great deal about the privilege of service.