

Education Mission Rooted in Health Care

When Laura and I first moved to Concepción, we took a trip with a health team to Delicias, San Marcos de la Sierra, one of the most remote villages in all of Southern, Intibucá. We started out before four in the morning. We drove about three hours, the last two hours plummeting about two thousand feet, until we ran out of road. From there we crossed a river and began hiking up the other side along zigzagging trails and cliffs. An hour and a half later we reached the small town comprised of the Shoulder to Shoulder health clinic that doubled as a grammar school, a few houses, a church, and an all-purpose family run store. We were exhausted from the trip. Shortly after our arrival, the people from the surrounding area began to arrive to see the medical team. The pregnant woman had classes to help them take care of themselves and their children. Those with chronic diseases received instructions on managing their illnesses. Others had lab work done, and still others had consults with the medical staff and doctor. There is a health promoter who spends the week in the community, visiting pregnant women and the infirm to treat them, educate them, and, on occasion, transport them to the larger medical facility in Concepción of La Esperanza. The health team visits monthly.



At the time of our visit, the community was building a school. They had a generator set up for the welding work, and masons were placing the cement cinder blocks. But how did they get the materials up here? I asked the question and received the most astounding answer. The materials are left at the end of the road prior to the trek up the mountain. Residents walking back into the small village are asked to carry the materials to the construction site. Healthy men carry four cinder blocks. Healthy women and children carry two. Pregnant women are only required to carry one.



My first reflection on all of this was how amazing is what Shoulder to Shoulder has accomplished. If not for our regular presence and intervention, many living here would simply die when faced with a serious illness or a complication arising from a pregnancy. Still, to think beyond this, Delicias is an anomaly even in Intibucá. Most small villages are not this isolated, without electricity or any infrastructure, and most have some means to gain regular access to health care because of Shoulder to Shoulder's presence. But when Shoulder to Shoulder arrived in Santa Lucia in 1990, every town on the Frontera of Intibucá looked just like Delicias. No one had electricity. No one had access to health care. Everyone lived a day's journey from the closest city of La Esperanza. The reason why that reality has changed for the positive is primarily because of the commitment of Shoulder to Shoulder, the synergy invested in partnerships with universities, medical professionals, and Hondurans, and a firm belief in the dignity of the human person. I do not say this so that we can take pride in what we've accomplished because I really don't believe that places like Southern Intibucá should exist in our world. There is too much abundance and talent in our world that it should not be shared liberally with those who are without access to basic human needs. I do say it, however, because it can be done, has been done, and we together can continue to make our world a more just place.



Our health mission is now sustained by a contract with the Honduran government that provides ongoing health care to all 70,000 residents of Southern Intibucá. It is by no means a perfect system, nor could we say it even comes close to the quality of health care in developed nations. Still, it is a just response that is sustainable. There are donors who continue to give generously to our health mission, and that generosity is greatly appreciated and utilized to improve our health care response. We also have 15 to twenty medical service teams that visit specific areas of the Frontera to augment that care. The quality of our health care will continue to improve and, most importantly, it is sustainable. How then do we now move beyond our health care mission, duplicating our success, and creating opportunity for the people of Southern Intibucá to free themselves from the oppression of poverty?

Shoulder to Shoulder has always invested in the value of sound education. I suppose this was primarily because those who first came to help recognized the very poor quality of education in Honduras, and specifically in the rural, isolated area of Southern Intibucá. But beyond that, those who first came must have also recognized the futility of providing aid without investment, ownership, and commitment from those being served. This creates dependent, unhealthy relationships that do not allow for real development. This is why today we employ over 100 Hondurans as medical professionals. It is also why this model of service is being applied to our mission in education. *What a folly it would be to not recognize the zeal of community members willing to haul cinder blocks up a treacherous mountain.* It is this commitment that needs to be honored and harnessed to create sustainable development.



We began our organized and sustained response to education in 2012 with the establishment of the Good Shepherd Bilingual School in Camasca. The quality of this school where there are books, materials, state-of-the-art technology, English-speaking volunteers, and learning is valued does not exist in any other public school in all of Honduras. Yet, that is just one school, and we are committed to all schools, all children and their parents. So in the past year or two we have begun introducing technology, pedagogical materials, training, and human resources into the other schools on the Frontera. All of this is being done under the authority and direction of the Department of Education and with the commitment of teachers, parents, and the local authorities of the towns and communities. It is not, and will not, be Shoulder to Shoulder's education mission, but it will be owned by those who will benefit from it, Hondurans. This is sustainability. This is real development.

We intend to do with education what we have accomplished and are continuing with health care: to create and sustain a quality model of service that can be owned and operated by Hondurans. As it has already done in health care, this will generate talent and resources that will bring about sustainable development that can overcome cyclical poverty.

We need as many partners, if not more, for this mission as we have already gained for the health mission. We need professionals, schools and organizations, donors and persons of good will, and those Hondurans ready to haul cinder blocks up mountains. Many of you already partner with us. If so, can

you help us find more partners? Here are a few ways that you and others can join us in this mission of transformation (just click the icon).



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