



Mercy Outreach Surgical Team

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San Diego doctors take their surgical services below the border and deliver dramatic changes in lives, thanks to the Mercy Outreach Surgical Team

MAKING THE MOST OF LIFE

BY JIM FITZPATRICK



BEFORE



AFTER

Antonio Flores, before and after surgery to correct a bilateral cleft lip. When the swelling subsides, he will be the prince of his village.



Mother-and-daughter patients await eye surgery at the Mercy Outreach Surgical Team's temporary facility in the Alberque Clinic in Uruapan, Michoacán, Mexico.

SIX-FOOT-TALL, 18-year-old Antonio Flores stands head and shoulders above the crowd of Mexicans at the Alberque Clinic in Uruapan, Michoacán. From the tip of his nose up, he's male-model handsome. Rich brown skin, high cheekbones, dark eyes and jetblack hair cut in a military

flat-top. But Antonio has been holding his hand in front of his mouth his entire life to cover a grotesque bilateral cleft lip. With dual openings in his upper lip, a flap of

flesh hangs from the base of his nose. Antonio's parents abandoned him when he was 4. As a child, he moved from

family to family, whenever anyone was kind enough to take him in. But most of his life he's lived on his own, homeless, finding work wherever anyone provided it, scavenging food anywhere he could, sleeping wherever he happened to be when night fell. Today, Antonio owns one T-shirt, one pair of pants and a pair of shoes, the sum of his worldly possessions. Antonio is a descendant of the indigenous people of Mexico—from the only tribe said not to have been conquered by the Spaniards. His people do not speak Spanish; they speak the language of their ancestors. They live in one room wooden shacks in mountain villages with dirt roads. A wood-burning pit provides fire for cooking and heat for

warmth. Through the efforts of the Desarrollo Integral del al Familia (a government social service), Antonio has heard that Club Rotario de Uruapan has made arrangements with a group of American doctors to come to Uruapan to perform operations that could correct the deformity that's made him an outcast. He lives in the rural mountains four hours from Uruapan, yet somehow he has found his way to the clinic despite his inability to communicate in Spanish. After a consultation, Antonio is accepted as a patient. And in a one hour operation, Dr. Thomas Vecchione of Scripps Mercy Hospital in San Diego repairs Antonio's lip, and changes his life forever.

Special thanks to Jim Fitzpatrick, publisher of San Diego Magazine, for allowing MOST to reprint this article.

When he awakens in recovery, I speak to him through an interpreter. “Now, when you return to your village, you will be the prince,” I say. Antonio nods as a single tear rolls down his cheek. The Mercy Outreach Surgical Team (MOST) program dates back to February 13, 1988, when the first Mercy Day was held at Mercy Hospital (now Scripps Mercy). Judy Hames and Pat Robinson had the vision to bring poor children from Mexico to San Diego for free surgery to correct birth defects untreatable in their home towns. Ever since the plan was approved by the hospital administration and board of directors, it has dramatically improved the lives of more than 9,000 young patients. The need for care—and the logistics of providing that care to so many—persuaded the group to move operations to Mexico. With the help of the Mexican government, and the cooperation and assistance of administrators like Dr. Sergio Hidalgo

hands-across-the border partnership. Local Mexican Rotary clubs—in this case Club Rotario de Uruapan—disseminate information throughout the region, alerting patients when the MOST team is coming. They also provide logistical help and transportation. The week-long programs are provided in Mexico twice a year; one-day clinics are held in Tijuana two to three times a year. Establishing an efficient surgical operation across the border presents myriad logistical, transportation and bureaucratic challenges. Months before this most recent visit, team members George Ochoa and Sal Hernandez traveled to Uruapan to examine the facilities and determine the supplies and equipment needed for the surgeries. Getting those supplies and equipment through customs and to the hospital on time was no small feat, but when the patients arrive with their dreams, everything is in place.

sit in quiet anticipation. The screening process presents challenges. Some, beyond help, have to be turned away. Their deformities are so severe they’re referred to other hospitals, some in the United States. Raul’s mother cries as she and her young son, who was born without one of his ears, leave the clinic. In this case, time is the enemy; there’s just no more left in the schedule. They were turned away last year, she says, for the same reason. Minutes later, Dr. Larry McCarthy says, “To hell with it,” runs into the courtyard to find Raul and his mother, and adds Raul to an extended schedule. During the next four days, four surgeons, four anesthesiologists, nurses, assistants and civilian volunteers—40 in all—change 344 lives forever. From 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. each day, with only a 10-minute lunch break, they operate on and correct cleft lips, cleft palates, strabismus (crossed eyes), burn scars, microtia (missing ears), hemangiomas (blood tumors), hairy nevi (dark birthmarks), extra fingers and toes, deformed hands



of the Lázaro Cárdenas Uruapan Hospital, the binational volunteer project was established. In 1992, Ricardo Escandón brought in Downtown San Diego Rotary Club 33 to lend financial and volunteer support in a true

THE TEAM GETS TO THE CLINIC at 6:30 a.m. Monday to screen patients to be operated on during the next four days. The courtyard is packed with more than 300 hopeful patients and their families. They

and scarred limbs. Francisco spilled boiling water on himself when he was only 7. His chin melded to his chest, and both upper arms grew attached to the sides of his torso. When he was 11, his parents found the MOST team. Today, at 18, he’s the star of his high-school basketball team. In the intervening years, Francisco has been visiting MOST doctors regularly. This time, he and his

Continued from page 2

family are here to say thank you and to show his progress. Omar, 4, the size of a normal 2-year-old, was born with partial eyelids. They extended from the outside only halfway across and were attached to his eyeballs. When he blinked, his eyes moved with the lids. He would have been blind by the age of 6 from the constant scratching of his cornea. Surgeons Harry O'Halloran and Dennis Bucko, who'd never seen such a condition, team up to detach the eyelids and extend them. When they're finished, Omar's eyes work normally, and the lids are perfectly aligned. He will not go blind. Rosa is giddy as she hops onto the operating table. She had brought her daughter, America, to have her eyes uncrossed, never anticipating she could have the same operation. Volunteer administrators Bill and Barbara Ward spotted Rosa when she checked in



with America. They brought her to Dr. O'Halloran, who agreed he could help her, too. The surgeons are as efficient as they are precise. Ophthalmic surgeon O'Halloran has corrected more than 50 cases of crossed eyes each day. In several cases, McCarthy, a plastic surgeon, harvested cartilage from a patient's chest cavity, carved it into the shape of an ear, inserted it under the skin of the skull, and created an ear where only an opening and lobe had existed.

“There are few rewards in medicine today,” says Dr. Vecchione, echoing the sentiments of other MOST team members. “This is the ultimate reward. These poor children are going through life fighting a steep uphill battle. Hopefully, we can level the playing field just a little bit.”

Adds anesthesiologist Jordan Waldman: “I’ve been blessed with the ability to do what I do and receive the material rewards. This is my way of

returning that blessing. It is a privilege.” Dr. McCarthy, who’s been on every one of the 27 trips since the program’s inception, says, “This is what the practice of medicine was supposed to be about—helping others in need.”



“This is what the practice of medicine was supposed to be about — helping others in need.”

– Dr. McCarthy



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MOST relies heavily on your philanthropic support.

Here are just a few examples of what your gift can accomplish:

- \$150 provides surgery for one child
- \$500 sponsors one team member
- \$15,000 covers team travel
- \$25,000 provides supplies for one mission
- \$50,000 sponsors the team for one week

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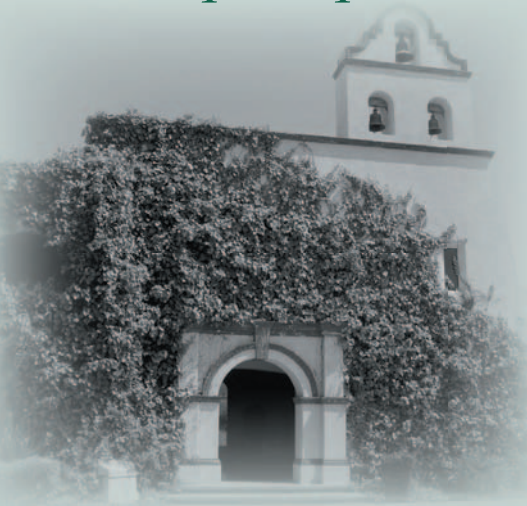
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Please clip and send this form to: **Mercy Outreach Surgical Team,**
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Mercy Days in 2005



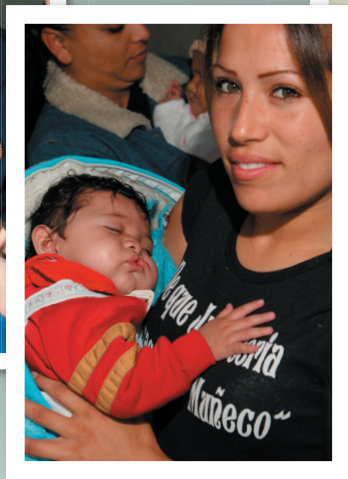
Since 1988, more than a thousand children have received life-changing surgery at Mercy Days in San Diego and Tijuana. The transition from an annual Mercy Day at Scripps Mercy Hospital to three Mercy Days at Hospital Inglés in

Tijuana has made a positive impact on MOST and the patients we serve. By sponsoring multiple surgical missions, MOST can treat more children. Also, since the missions are held in Tijuana, MOST avoids the mountains of red tape that must be negotiated to bring so many people across the border. The savings are enormous.

In 2005, MOST held three Mercy Days at Hospital Inglés. In March, MOST treated 35 patients for cleft lips and palates. In June, MOST surgeons conducted 63 eye surgeries, mostly for strabismus or crossed eyes. In September, the team treated 9 cleft lips and 34 hernias.

Like all MOST trips, Mercy Days are successful because of the support of numerous people and organizations. MOST wishes to thank Dr. Armando Garcia Carrillo, of Hospital Inglés for supplying operating rooms and volunteers. Thanks also go to Beth Ilko and the Centro Social Israelita for their facilities, which are used as a staging area to evaluate patients. Also Mexicoach provides a bus to ferry team members to Hospital Inglés and the Hotel Pueblo Amigo offers a significant discount.

MOST also wishes to thank San Diego Rotary Club #33 for their ongoing support.



Tijuana photos by Sergio Fernandez

MOST Missions

MOST made its second visit to Tehuacan, Puebla on Nov. 6 -12.

The next trip to Tijuana will be Feb. 17 and 18.

How to Contact MOST

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MOST Mission Statement

Mercy Outreach Surgical Team is a volunteer group dedicated to providing medical and surgical care to needy children and adults of other nations.

Our mission is threefold:

- To bring hope, comfort and the opportunity for a better life to children and adults through corrective surgery;
- To share medical knowledge and expertise with colleagues in a host country;
- To provide an opportunity for team volunteers to experience the spiritual rewards of service.

In addition to caring for those in need of surgery, MOST shares valuable knowledge and medical techniques with local physicians and nursing staff in Mexico.

Each year, MOST provides care during field programs, when surgical teams with needed supplies and equipment travel to Mexico to set up surgical programs in local communities. San Diego Rotary Club members and representatives from cities in Mexico coordinate these efforts and contribute to the logistics and support of the programs. Volunteers donate time and contribute to the expenses for the field programs. Most of the equipment and supplies are also donated.

MOST is supported by donations of personal skills, money, supplies and equipment.

Tax-deductible donations can be made to:

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