

Perspective from Nicaragua

July 2014

A recent journey will remain a constant reminder to me of how blessed we are to live in America.

On Friday the 13th of June I boarded a plane in Atlanta bound for Nicaragua. I spent 10 days with approximately 90 other people from five states as part of a medical mission. Although I have my doctorate, my children used to say I am not the kind of doctor that can do you any good, especially on a medical mission. I traveled with doctors, nurses, dentists, and other volunteers who were using their vacation time to minister to the people of Nicaragua.

Nicaragua is currently recognized as one of the poorest countries in Latin America. People there often lack access to or cannot afford medical care and the government does little to help. Our first experience with the government occurred while clearing customs shortly after our arrival. They seized some of the medical instruments and all of the suture kits medical personnel planned to use. One of the doctors who has made this trip many times told me they used to confiscate their medicines, so they started buying the medicine in Nicaragua. Medicines are not regulated as they are here and most are available without a prescription.

I was shocked at the houses and living conditions along the route of the dilapidated school bus carrying us through the country to our makeshift clinic. I saw houses with no doors, no windows, and dirt floors. I saw a man plowing with oxen. Another man was mixing concrete by hand while a coworker carried the mixed concrete in a bucket to the work site. In town, I noticed that all of the houses had fences topped with razor wire. One fence had broken glass bottles set in the concrete to keep potential thieves out. These are the daily standards of living for the people of Nicaragua.

During our time there, more than 2,200 people went through our medical clinic to receive medical care, medicine, clothes, rice, and beans. Many began waiting in line as early as 4 a.m., with old and young standing in the heat for hours to see a doctor. The conditions under which visiting doctors worked were harsh and primitive compared to their offices and hospitals in the United States. For example, members of our team made a stand out of bungee cords to administer IV fluids to a severely dehydrated patient. One of the doctors surgically removed a foreign object from a woman's foot while kneeling on a dirty wooden floor in front of his patient sitting in a dentist's chair. The object had been in her foot for so many years that her body tissue had grown around it. The pain made it incredibly difficult for her to walk, yet she had traveled on foot a long way with her four-year-old son just to see the doctor.

One of the hardest things for me to see was the struggling children. Many didn't have shoes or proper clothing, but their eyes were bright and their smiles were wide when I gave them one of the Happy Meal toys my grandchildren had been saving to send to the children of Nicaragua.

Of course, I was interested in the school system. Their school year runs from February to November and I was told that elementary education is free and compulsory. However, instead of being in school, many children were begging in the streets or trying to sell flowers made from grass. It was evident the compulsory education law was not enforced. Educational facilities are inaccessible to children in remote areas where it is still customary for children to work for their parents from a young age. Of children who are able to enroll, only 30% make it through grade 6. A secondary school education is a luxury of which many poorer Nicaraguans can only dream.

During my flight home, I kept thinking about the poverty in Nicaragua and felt a little guilty returning to the riches of the United States. I would be able to drink the water without getting sick and enjoy relief from the exhausting heat. We are so blessed in this country and we often take those blessings for granted. We sometimes forget the many sacrifices others have made to provide the freedom we enjoy in America. As educators, we must continue to teach the history of our country and our heritage as Americans. As someone has said, "It is easy to take liberty for granted when you have never had it taken from you." We cannot allow ourselves to become so comfortable and complacent that we forget what makes our country so great and the brave Americans who guard our freedom.