

Feeding the Children: My Summer in Guatemala at Casa Jackson

by MARIA E. PONCE

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THE SUMMER OF 2012 I had the opportunity to study abroad in Antigua, Guatemala, through a UT faculty-led program at Casa Herrera with Dr. Luis Urrieta, a professor in the College of Education and Center for Mexican American Studies.

Antigua, located forty-five minutes from the capital of Guatemala City, has a population of roughly 36,000 people, made up mainly of Ladinos and indigenous Maya, with a noticeable presence of foreign-born also within the local population. The city's economy thrives on tourism, Spanish-language-learning tourism, and coffee. Each day consisted of early morning walks to school on cobblestone streets with volcanoes visible in the background, vibrantly colored Spanish colonial architecture, and street vendors along the way. Antigua's center is filled with the sounds of local musicians, people both young and old, Spanish Kaqchikel, and other languages ranging from English to Mandarin Chinese.

While abroad, I noticed a significant correlation between economic inequalities, ethnicity, and the high level of malnutrition among poor children. This correlation led me to focus my field project for Dr. Urrieta's class on malnutrition within Guatemala, its effects on poor rural communities, and the means by which governmental and nongovernmental (NGO) entities are trying to combat the issue at hand.

Although I spent the majority of my time in the heart of Antigua, I was able to volunteer through a class project at an NGO called



Maria Ponce with one of the young patients at Casa Jackson.

Casa Jackson, located on the outskirts of Antigua toward Jocotenango. Casa Jackson focuses on nursing malnourished children back to health and is the only organization of its kind in the country. It provides the medical attention that many malnourished children need but that their families cannot afford. The organization comes under two umbrella NGOs, Nuestros Ahijados (in Guatemala) and the GOD's Child Project (in the U.S.). Casa Jackson is the GOD's Child Project emergency recovery and public education center for malnourished Guatemalan infants and children under the age of 11. Casa Jackson for Malnourished Infants was established in 2007 in response to the growing number of ill and near-death infants that Patrick Atkinson (founder of GOD's Child Project) found abandoned on the doorstep of the project's Guatemalan program office. Casa Jackson opened in October 2008 thanks to a donation from Gene and Sue Jackson of North Dakota and runs on roughly US\$30,000 a year. The Jacksons continue to provide 40 percent of the operating costs, while staff and volunteers raise the remaining 60 percent. Casa Jackson has room for twenty patients, suffering from mild to severe malnutrition. Fifty percent of Casa Jackson patients come from Antigua's close surrounding areas, while the other 50 percent come from Escuintla, the second most violent and one of the poorest regions in Guatemala. Many of the patients at Casa Jackson are indigenous Maya and were admitted to the home through hospital recommendations or on a voluntary basis.

As a volunteer, I worked eight to twelve hours a week with other volunteers and the nursing staff. My job consisted of cleaning the children's cribs and play areas, disinfecting toys, folding laundry, feeding the children, changing diapers, and most important, giving the children as much tender loving care as possible. The severity of malnutrition varied from child to child, and some of the Casa Jackson residents came with other needs, such as blindness, broken limbs, and Down syndrome. The time, volunteers, and resources needed to run Casa Jackson required more than was available. For instance, a typical dinner shift meant that a nurse and one volunteer had an hour and a half to feed twenty children, only

three of whom could feed themselves.

Guatemala has the highest rate of malnutrition in Latin America and the third highest rate of malnutrition in the world. Almost every child in rural Guatemala is currently suffering or will suffer from malnutrition in their lifetime, and 49.8 percent of Guatemalan children under the age of 15 are malnourished. Malnutrition in Guatemala is often due to a parent or family's inability to provide adequately nutritious food because of cost. Many parents cannot afford to give their children milk or formula and can provide only a standard diet of tortillas, beans, and coffee. Young children are commonly given bottles that are a mixture of half coffee and half milk, or water as a replacement for milk. Coffee makes a body feel full, promoting malnutrition by causing the child not to feel hungry enough to eat later in the day. Severe malnutrition commonly results in stunted growth, juvenile diabetes, heart problems, loss of teeth/hair, cerebral defects and/or delayed physical and mental development, and premature mortality. Due to the stunted growth, many children who are malnourished do not look it. They tend to appear small for their age, but often they do not look "sickly."

Despite the economic disparities in Guatemala and the setbacks that some communities face, the children I met consistently had an air of resilience to them. Casa Jackson never made the children feel pitied, only loved, well fed, and cared for, regardless of resources. Saúl, Alberto, Humberto, Madai, Katerin, Dana, and the other children at Casa Jackson showed me strength, above all—the strength that comes with having access to adequate medical treatment, along with constant love and care. These children have endured despite medical hardships rarely seen in U.S. daily life, and they will continue to endure the obstacles ahead in order to live another day. It was a rare sight to see the children fall asleep with anything other than a smile on their faces. Staff and patients alike regarded each day as an opportunity for the children to get better and eventually to leave Casa Jackson and return to their families or those able to care for them. ☀

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