

Bring the world into focus . . .

# VOSH-Indiana Chapter

Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity



## Honduras

### Then and Now



*by Joyce Crawley, Editor*

In July 2004, Dr. Jeff Marshall called and informed me that I was going to Honduras. After 25 years of writing about it, and 10 years since I had gone on a mission, I needed to see for myself how things have changed. Jeff was right. What I saw was very different from my first mission in 1982.

In 1982, the Honduran war was winding down, and flying in to Tegucigalpa was intimidating. The landing strip was lined with army green tanks, big guns, and trucks. We flew on Sahsa Airlines, and on the back of the seat, someone had scratched in an acronym, "Stay At Home & Stay Alive." The flight stopped in Belize and Nicaragua, where they tried to take all our eyeglasses off the plane as

"contraband." We lost 5 boxes of glasses.

During our stay we were "treated" to a day at the park by our hosts. We were stopped by guerillas in the mountains and searched for drugs. They took our passports and it was without a doubt the scariest moment of my life. They let us go, but the day stayed with me forever.

We worked in Comayagua at a Lions Club on the town square and were housed by the Lions Club's families. It was hot, and more than 3,000 people lined up around the square and waited for hours, sometimes days, to get an eye exam. Their patience in the hot sun was amazing. Their gratitude at getting an eye exam and a pair of glasses touched all of us.

For those of us on that first trip who had not witnessed true poverty, it was a shock. A child begging in the square, abandoned by his family, and crippled by a club foot, would have had surgical repair of the foot as a child and lived a normal life in the US. Seeing huts, made of whatever they can find to put a roof over their heads, was inconceivable to us. Washing clothes, using the bathroom and drinking from the river appalled us. Only the rich lived safely, with water filters and adobe walls protecting them from the outside. The rest of the people lived a dangerous life of disease, hunger, lack of education and uncertainty. There was no middle class.

I stayed with the only obstetrician

in Comayagua, who operated the only OB clinic for a hundred miles. His wife was an attorney. Their home was beautiful, with groundskeepers and maids. I felt uncomfortable staying there. I wanted to change what was outside their adobe walls. I came home determined to do what I could.

What I had to offer was writing about my experiences and that of others who had gone on a mission. I wanted to encourage people to see third world countries and to help where they could.

### San Pedro Sula 2005

The airport was a surprise. It was new, with all the amenities. It was only the first of many surprises. San Pedro Sula is now a bustling, prosperous city, with every chain restaurant you can name, large malls, beautiful hotels and many magnificent homes. Right across the river, the huts were still there, and the people still washing clothes on the rocks and drinking the dirty water. It was apparent that not everything was new and up-to-date.

The school we worked in consisted of three buildings, each housing three rooms where 70-90 kids of all ages would attend classes. The furniture was out of a 1950 schoolroom. The supplies were scant or non-existent. The only computer is in the superintendent's office. There was an outhouse facility that was less than spic and span. Schools are funded by taxes, which are woefully inadequate. The children are the same as I remember, beautiful and happy, not noticing their poverty.

## The People of Honduras

For all the things the Honduran people don't have, they possess one thing I admire. They are, overall, a happy people and were so grateful that we were there to help them. The children are amazing and inventive - an empty coke becomes a soccer ball, a wadded piece of paper becomes a basketball. The only thing I found missing was a sense of ambition in the young patients we saw. The young women are commonly unwed mothers. Young men seem to take little responsibility, perpetuating poverty. Those things don't seem to have changed.

But then you meet ambition face-to-face. She is 88, he is 95. They lived and worked in the coffee bean fields for 50 years. When they entered a nursing home, they were not allowed to stay in the same room, so they found a way around that. They got married! The bride repeatedly asked me if we would send them to the US for their honeymoon. (see photo on photo page.)

## The Volunteers

80 people - doctors, volunteers, techs and students found their assignments and went to work. After so many years of experience, Jeff Marshall and Ruth Berkling's missions run like clockwork. When you arrive at the airport, someone is there to exchange your money. When you arrive at the hotel, your room is ready. When they say the bus will leave for the work site, the bus leaves. Most important, everyone knows their job and everyone helps everyone else. The work days go quickly and smoothly.

The permanent Medical Clinic is run like an extremely efficient hospital, allowing for more than 40 surgeries this trip. Dr. Kevin

Waltz and his volunteer staff work together like it's just another day at the office. Dr. Waltz tells us it is



John and Mona Delgado celebrated their 19th VOSH Mission this year.

because of some very special long-term volunteers.

"I don't know what we would do without John and Mona Delgado," Dr. Kevin Waltz says. "John's translating skills are amazing and make my job so much easier. Mona does the paperwork and scheduling." John's first trip was in 1988. He and Mona possess a very special volunteer spirit. 2005 was their 19th mission, and John has assisted with more than 600 surgeries.

John and Mona have seen things during those 19 years that were heartbreaking. When a mother brought her baby to the clinic asking for help, the doctors had to tell her that the baby had died. John helped to take up a collection to bury the infant. But there is also inspiration. Following bi-lateral cataract removal, a 96 year old man was able to see his 49 year old son for the first time.

John is the Director of the US Department of Labor Apprenticeship Program, where he sets up trade programs. He and Mona have been married 35 years

and have two children, Steven, 29 and Scott, 25, both of whom have gone on VOSH missions. Scott spent three weeks working in the clinic after his first mission.

When asked what the most exciting event has been in all those years, he replied, "the day we found a boa constrictor wrapped around the wheels under our mobile clinic! And, the day we had to take a gun away from one of our patients was pretty good, too!"

Even with John and Mona's busy work and family schedule they've found time to host 20 Hondurans over the years at his home while they received corneal transplants.

There is a special place in their hearts for the kids. When they hosted a 7 year old who needed corneal transplants, they have never forgotten her and still keep in touch. She now has two children, one of whom has downs syndrome. John and Mona set up a savings account so her children would have an education and medical care.

John's philosophy is simple, "Everybody should help whenever they can - here or in the states. Your own troubles go away when you are helping others. Not to mention that the Man upstairs is keeping score!"

## The Nolans Honored

James and Bernice Nolan have spent their lives in service to others. They have received the CYO St. John Bosco Award, a service award from the Indiana General Assembly, and the VOSH Lifetime Award. Jim has received the VFW Outstanding Citizenship Award, the Lions' Club Jones



Fellowship Award, the Harvest Homecoming Person of the Year and the Distinguished Service to Optometry Award.

Jim and Bernice recently received the Scholarship and Achievement Award from the Archdiocese of Indianapolis' Celebrating Catholic School Values program.

From all of us who have had the pleasure of working with you through the years, congratulations on a lifetime of extraordinary giving.

**VOSH-International names  
Robert and Shirley Merriam  
2004 Humanitarians of the Year**

Bob Merriam spent his career as an electrical engineer for General Electric, but he found his passion on a VOSH Indiana mission in 1983. Since then he has led or volunteered for over 60 missions.

The Merriam's live in Owensboro, Kentucky. After Bob's first mission in 1983, Shirley joined him for most of the rest of the trips. Following Bob's retirement in 1988, they became really serious about travel and their passion for helping the poor to better eyesight.

When they are not travelling the world, they work with the Lion's Clubs collecting and processing glasses.

Sixty missions, more time and effort than can be counted and a passion for helping others make the Merriam's the perfect choice for the award.



The Doctors of the 2005 VOSH Mission. Left to right seated, Steve Ball, Dennis Lauck, Blair Tanaka, Jim Nolan and Jeff Marshall. Left to right, standing, John Offerle, Mike Frische, Pat Moss, Don Mizelle, Ron Nolan and J. J. Abrams. (Not pictured, Dr. Kevin Waltz.)

## Mission Dates Announced

**Honduras 2006**

**March 4 - 11**

**Tentative - Cuba 2006 late April (requires governmental approval and Cuban permission)**

**Africa - 2007 - November - more to come**

**For more information on missions, contact Dr. Jeffrey Marshall by email [drjcm@att.net](mailto:drjcm@att.net)**

*Stickers were a very popular item among the children, and they stuck them all over their faces and arms. Every mission takes treats for the kids.*







Left to right, Emiel Kooij, Floortje De Brabanber and Jan Kok of the Netherlands enjoy relaxing by the pool following a long day of work at the mission site.

### **The Dutch Connection**

Two years ago Jeff Marshall was contacted about some SVOSH students in the Netherlands who were interested in volunteering for VOSH Missions. Three students attended the 2005 Honduran Mission, Emiel Kooij, Jan Kok and Floortje Brabander. This was Floortje's third year, and she has been invited to do a two month fellowship in the office of Dr. Kevin Waltz in Indianapolis.

The Netherlands accepts only 20 optometry students a year, which makes finding a job easy following graduation. Their school system tests all students in the eighth grade, and their aptitude is determined. They are then placed in a curriculum during their high school years that will allow them to follow that pre-determined career path and to get into the college best suited to their aptitude.

### **The Children of Honduras**

Betty Drake found her job of helping to move people from one exam area to the next just about the best job in the world because she got to work with the children.

"The children are so beautiful, so imaginative, so loving and so playful," says Betty. Her job was to assist those who needed help to find the next room to report to after pre-screening, but most of the time she was surrounded by scores of curious kids.

"They find such joy in the smallest things. They were fascinated by our clothes, our name badges and our language. They loved the stickers we brought and put them all over their faces and arms. The blow up guitars were a huge hit. It was great fun working and playing with them."



### **Who are the travelers on a**

#### **VOSH Mission?**

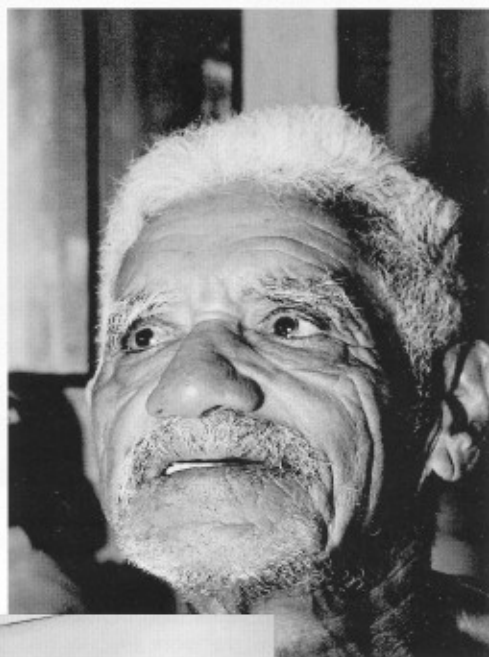
- President of a Better Business Bureau
- An Event Planner
- Students of Optometry
- Students in High School
- Retired persons who love to travel
- Doctors of all types - Optometrists, Allergists, MD's, Dentists
- Marine Biologists
- Business Owners
- Homemakers
- Professional Photographers
- Writers
- Teachers
- And you! Sign up today for 2006. Contact Dr. Jeffrey Marshall at [drjcm@att.net](mailto:drjcm@att.net)

## Mission Faces



Left, Maria Isla, age 88 and her new husband, Leonardo Pinera, age 95. Together for more than 50 years they decided to get married this year.

Right, one of the patients smiles with gratitude at his first ever eye exam at age 79.



Below, right, Dr. Kevin Waltz and his son dressed to the nines for the farewell dinner.



Above, "Air guitars" were a favorite gift for the children.

Below, two generations of Nolans assist a patient.



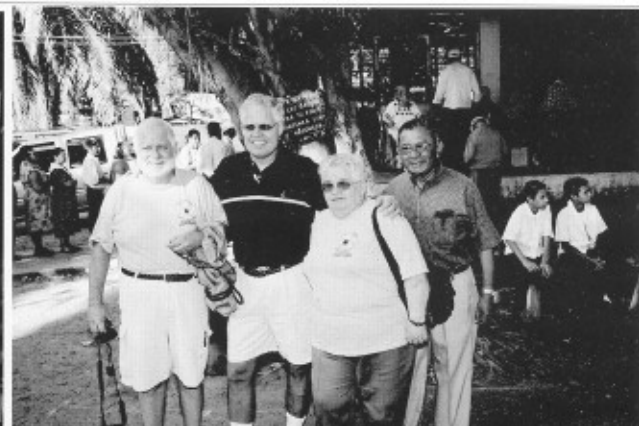
Above, "World traveler, BJ Maley, fits a pair of glasses. Below, the kids invent a teeter totter using an old board.



## Mission Faces

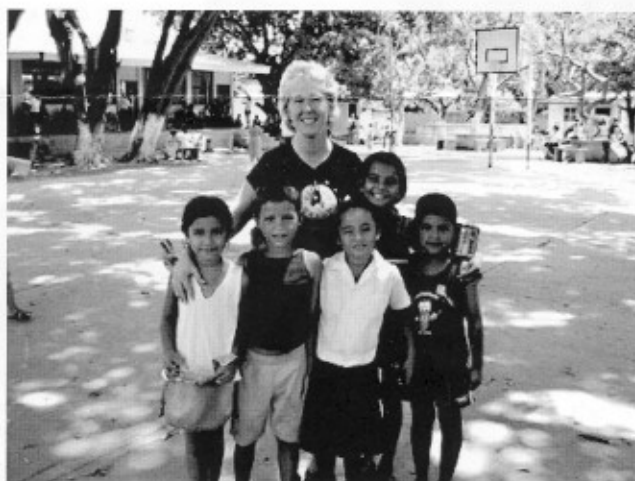
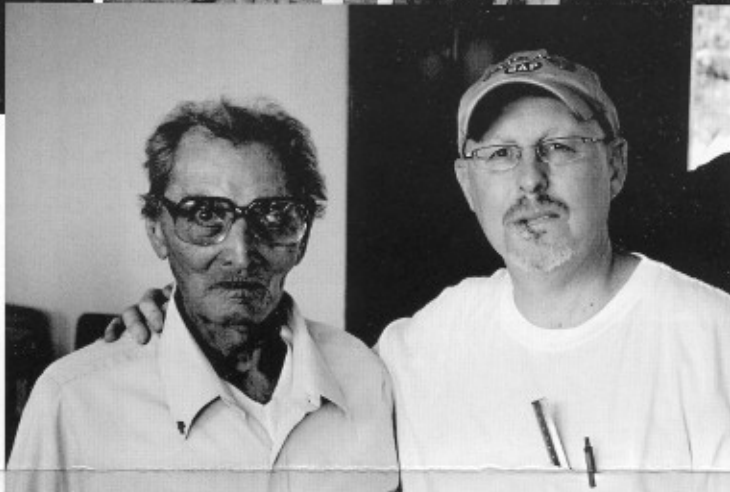


Above - All the beautiful women of the 2005 VOSH mission.



Above right, Dr. Marshall, Dr. John Offerle, Ruth Berkling and the D. Alfredo Pineda at the work site.

Right - Steven Griffey assists a cataract patient.



Left - Jacque McNulty with some of her patients.

Below Left - The "River People's" huts line the river, where they wash their clothes, drink and bathe.

Below - Amazing how many friends you can get in Honduras with candy! Liz Frische and Jane Townsend found a new friend with no trouble.







Ruth gets a hug of congratulations from Jeff Marshall after the presentation of a Lifetime Achievement award.

### **Lifetime Achievement Awarded**

It was a very big night for Ruth Berkling. On the last night of the VOSH 2005 Honduran Mission, it was Ruth's birthday. A beautiful cake was placed on a table at the front of the dining room. Ruth thought she was about to hear "Happy Birthday" sung by the group. Instead, Ruth was dumbstruck by an emotional announcement by Dr. Jeff Marshall that she was about to receive the highest award VOSH offers, the Lifetime Achievement Award.

The award is given only to those who have exhibited more than 20 years of dedicated service to VOSH. Ruth's more than 30 years of hard work, including a full time medical clinic in San Pedro Sula, providing the Honduran voice to the government for permits, getting Chiquita Banana ships to agree to transport supplies, finding venues for missions, finding housing for the volunteers, taking care of the pre-mission publicity to inform the needy of an upcoming mission date, and a myriad of other assignments.

Ruth is a hands-on administrator and attends every day of every mission. She knows what has to be done, and finds a way to make sure everything runs smoothly. She finds the right people to do everything from bringing the workers their lunch to where to line up the patients and set up the refraction rooms.

Born in Germany, Ruth came to Honduras with her husband, now deceased. After his death, she ran their business until her retirement. Her business background and the connections she made over the years has helped her gain an attitude "that nothing is impossible - but it may take awhile to get it done."

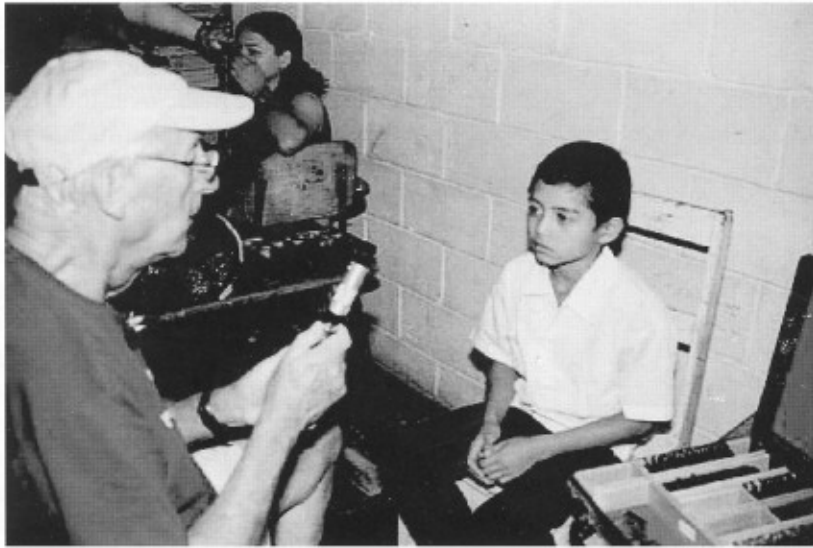
For the people of Honduras, the medical clinic she worked so hard to build is often the only medical eye care the poor have available to them. Doctors from the local hospital volunteer their time and perform cataract surgeries and other medical eye treatments.

Without Ruth, there would be no clinic, and the missions would be far more difficult, if not impossible. This is one birthday Ruth won't forget.



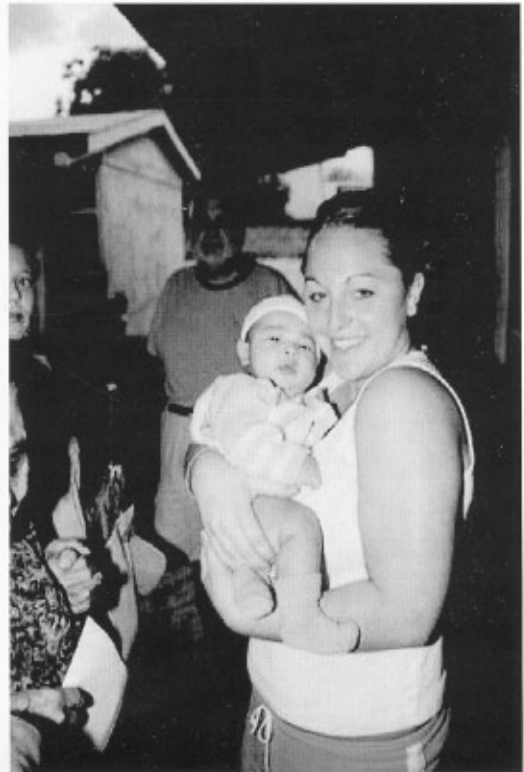
Jeff and Ruth at the last night in Honduras "Happy Birthday" party for Ruth.

## Our Parting Shots



Dr. J. J. Abrams (above) has traveled on many missions. Now semi-retired, he enjoys being able to help so many in so few days.

Liz, daughter of Dr. Mike Frische was one of the children's favorites. She spent hours playing games with them to keep them occupied while their parents were receiving their exams and glasses.



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