

Payasas!

Payasos!

Clowning in the Hills of Guatemala



There was a clown, a priest, and a dentist walking down the road. Sounds like a joke, but there we were -- three clowns, a priest and several dentists. This was a trip sponsored by Clinica Corpus Christi. Danny Kollaja wrote me in February. "I'm going to Guatemala again in March. Want to come along?" "Sure do" I responded. So off we went -- three clowns: Danny, myself and Nancy "Belle" Petritis from Chicago. Also on the team was Minnie Ganem our cheerful translator, Father Bob Dunne, Dr. Haysam Dawod and Sara Merdes (founder of Clinica Corpus Christi - See page 11).

We stayed in the Franciscan Convent at the Clinica Corpus Christi Clinic and Children's Home in Patzun, Chimaltenango. The Sisters were just wonderful and took such good care of us. It was such a privilege to be in their home. We ate our meals with them and helped when we could (Actually Sara took over a lot of the masterful cooking). The countryside of Guatemala was spectacular. We even saw a little puff of smoke come out of one of the volcanoes. But nothing was as colorful, sweet, and receptive as the people we met in the mountain villages of Pachut and Chipiactal.

As the convent was housed next to the orphanage and clinic, there were always children around which was such a delight. We did get to perform for them one day which included a skit, magic, face painting, balloons and all the stuff we community clowns can do. Another day we were asked to perform for a school. We figured maybe a hundred students - but were surprised with 1,500

students! Between the three of us we managed to get something together to perform..

We made two trips during the week into the mountain villages with the dentists. The first day Danny, Shobi, Dr. Haysam Dawod and Father Bob went to Pachut. Nancy went to a school in Guatemala City (see Photo on next page) We went to Pachut by jeep and when the jeep couldn't make it up the steep road, we walked. At 8,000 feet that was no small challenge.

I put my makeup in a little room next to the school. There was no shade on the window so I played peek-a-boo with the curious kids at my window with different stages of my makeup. So by the time the Payasa got out of the room, they were ready for me. I entertained the crowd while the dentists set up their "dental office." Then I did a little improvisation with Haysam. I found him "sleeping" in his dentist chair, so I put cotton rolls in his mouth like big fang teeth. Haysam caught on quickly and began playing with me. I put him back in the dentist chair and pulled a "mouth coil" out of his mouth. Needless to say we had a good crowd of villagers around us, fascinated and delighted with the streamers of rainbow colors coming out of their dentist's mouth..

Haysam was great at improvising. We actually did a little bit with latex gloves. I would blow one up, then he would blow one up bigger, then I did one and then his popped and I jumped a foot. Then I'd get my finger stuck trying to tie the end. He would try to help and clown chaos would prevail. Of course all this was done in mime as I didn't speak any Spanish. All this time Father Bob was giving confession and doing Mass. We were needless to say a well rounded health team on all levels.

After clowning around, we had to get down to the business of pulling teeth. There were no dental assistants, so Danny and I were it. I quickly learned about sterilizing instruments, loading novocaine needles, and holding heads and hands. Haysam was very patient about telling me what instruments he needed. He actually gave them names that I would recognize - like "Hand me the bull horns."



The orphanage was next to the convent we stayed at so there were always children around and they loved having their faces painted. Especially tigers and butterflies - "Mariposa."

Clowning in Guatemala



While Danny and I were off to Patzun, Nancy "Belle" Petritis brought cheer to some hospitalized children.

In Chipiacul, Nancy and I entertained the crowd while Father Bob heard confession and the dentists set up. When we started pulling teeth, Nancy occupied the children by making hats, and Father Bob took over filling the novocaine needles, while I assisted the dentists. You see we all pitched in where needed. The clown became a dental assistant, the dentist a clown, the priest a lab assistant. It was some grand team.



Pictured above are Dr. Haysam Dawod of Corpus Christi Texas, Shobi and a young patient in Chipiacul Guatemala. In the village where the dental equipment was on the porch (no electricity) it was more comfortable to play as I helped. For example, I could never get the gloves on right, so I just played at it. But when we were separated from the crowd by windows full of curious

curious onlookers, it felt sort of strange being in costume and holding gauze on a bloody tooth. There was much work to do and I just did what was needed. It did feel good to hold heads and rub cheeks. I think the clown was comforting to the people not scary or inappropriate. I loved the experience and hope to go back again soon.

Danny came out as "Dr. Oops" at a town meeting - (like in "Oops" I forgot my pants. (Pictured below)



A trip like this is affordable to a lot of us - airfare plus a little money for food. The trips to Russia and China range from \$3000 to \$5000. We need to look around our communities for other groups that do international outreach, for example Flying Doctors and Doctors without Borders. Clowns Without Borders sends clowns in to countries with areas of "stress." They generally do performances and entertain children in groups. In a future issue of the newsletter we will cover this group as one of their main clowns lives right here in San Francisco.

So check out your Lions Clubs and Rotary Club for groups going into "stress" areas. If you hear of a national or international group you think would be receptive to having clowns accompany them, let me know. Maybe by sending them articles from the newsletter, we can show them that we clowns are not just circus clowns or birthday party clowns. There is a new breed of clown - the Hospital Clown, the Caring Clown. We hospital clowns are gaining attention all over the world and the world is beginning to understand the benefits of our presence.

Clinica Corpus Christi

is a medical clinic and a 24 bed hospital and nutritional center for needy children and infants in Patzun, Chimaltenango. The goal of Clinica Corpus Christi is to continue to meet the medical needs of the area; improving the lives of many residents who would not otherwise get medical attention. In many cases this is the difference between life and death.

Sara Merdes went to Guatemala 22 years ago and saw a need. "I worked with a Franciscan Priest and the first thing we did was to buy a piece of land to house a nursery for 250 children. Then we went on to build the clinic and the hospital." There is a full time doctor on staff and many visiting doctors and dentists from the United States who, by the way, volunteer their time. Clinica Corpus Christi is not affiliated with any national or international organization; they saw a need in Guatemala and began to raise funds. And Sara is some incredible fund raiser.

About the clowns Sara says, "I always had a dream to have clowns come to bring the happiness that is so needed. Last year Danny went and this was the first clown in the area. They were all so excited. This year we had three. It was wonderful."

In assisting the dentists Shobi experienced this overwhelming need of these people for dental work. They live in remote areas many of which are cut off during the rainy season. So when the dentists come, the people come from villages all around to get their teeth "fixed." Because of the lack of facilities this usually means pulling teeth. On one day I think we pulled 87 teeth! The clinic now has a portable generator and the equipment to fill cavities, but this wasn't available to the dentist when we were there. Dr. Dawod would say "I have to pull the tooth because we won't be back for three months. By that time the tooth will abscess and it would be more painful and serious. As a matter of fact one of the young men standing in line waiting for the dentist fainted because of abscessed teeth that were poisoning his system. Many of these people were in pain when they came. We gave them novocaine and antibiotics.



Above: Sara Merdes, twins from the children's home and Shobi.

Some had as many as eight teeth pulled. I would hold their head as they were sitting in regular chairs. But every month more and more help arrives. Contact Sara at Clinica Corpus Christi, 3413 Topeka, Corpus Christi, TX 78411



We had dinner every night at the convent with much cheer and laughter. Together with Father Bob Dunne are Sisters Angela, Balvina, Marina, Aura Marina, Marcia. Not shown are Mother Carmen and Sister Ana Mirian.