

**Honduras Trip Report – Fall 2023**  
**Department of Family Medicine, University of Rochester**

<b>Participants</b>	
<u>Faculty</u> Ryan Cummings Doug Stockman	<u>Residents</u> Yoni Abress, Shea Kelly-Buckley, Ronald Roseman
<u>Interpreters</u> Diego, Paulet, Leo, sometimes Melissa	<u>Unitarian Church</u> Barbara Gawinski Phil Stern
<u>Dental</u> Roger Carroll	<u>Cook</u> Melissa and sister Ana

**Introduction**

The Department of Family Medicine at the University of Rochester operates a Global Health Program. This year-round program travels twice a year for two weeks at a time to rural Honduras. The Department has partnered with a rural community called San Jose, San Marcos de la Sierra in the Southwestern state of Intibucá, Honduras. The needs of the target community are great and go beyond curative medicine. By listening to the concerns of the local community members and performing qualitative community assessment, we are creating interventions designed to address the common problems. Below is a report from our Fall 2023 trip.

**Travel and General Comments**

The travel part of the trip to Honduras was uneventful. That is until we reached Honduran customs. Barbara and Doug were stopped. For some reason we are not clear about, Barbara was held for about 2 hours. In the end she had to pay about \$5 to get her passport back and her luggage released. The worker had focused on a container of gum as a problem.

The food cooked for us by sisters Melissa and Ana was very good. We did not have electricity for about half of the trip. This is definitely a challenge in terms of keeping foods cold and safe. There is no running water in the area so we rely on rain water for bathing, washing dishes, etc. The most challenging part of this trip was the constant rain and the resulting mud everywhere. We, at least, had enough water for bathing and flushing the toilet.

**Education & Schools**

The First Unitarian Church of Rochester has been partnering with the Department of Family Medicine at the University of Rochester since 2008. Initial financial support from the First U aided in efforts for cistern construction, water pipes, and faucets to run water in family homes. Thereafter, a committee was developed to work on a scholarship program to advance children's education. Most children in San Jose only attended school up to 6<sup>th</sup> grade. In grade school there are multiple children of different class years in the same classroom.

Current Scholarship Students

The First Unitarian Church developed a scholarship application and selection process 15 years ago. Since that time, independent donors have supported students from 7th grade through university; this year the 175th student entered into the program. As part of the expected volunteer time for the receipt

of the scholarship, fifteen students met the arriving Rochester team to help move the groceries, medical and dental supplies and other equipment from the bus to the clinic and kitchen. The previous weekend they and some parents had cleaned and cleared the land surrounding the volunteer house, kitchen and dining area. They are truly hard workers to receive their scholarship.

Of the 33 students offered scholarships this academic year, one young woman will complete nursing school, and three girls will graduate high school with the hopes to continue their education into nursing school or the police academy. Eight students hope to be promoted to 12th grade in November as their grades were impressive this year. The remaining students continue to either do extremely well or struggle a great deal to obtain the 70% to pass to the next grade. The loss of educational classes during the pandemic seems to have most impacted those students in 7th and 8th grade. When school is closed during coffee picking season, students will be offered time to remediate before their final grades are submitted to the Department of Education. Four girls did not continue this year in the scholarship program.



*Scholarship students carry water for our group*

Students receive scholarship money to pay for materials, school and gym uniforms, transportation, meals, and exams. Some students pay for room and board as well. Families sending children to advance their education often lose an income earner or a family home helper. Scholarship dollars also offset this loss of income or support.

### New Scholarship Application

Twenty-one children applied for new scholarships for 7th grade or 10th grade. Their parents completed the necessary forms. These application packets will be reviewed by the First Unitarian scholarship selection committee and sixteen students will receive scholarships based on grades in school and their written application. They will receive funds in February and May for the purchase of materials, uniforms, transportation and food. If they live too far from school, which may be a 3 hour walk each way, some families decide to find rental housing in the school community. These students will continue to receive scholarships as long as they are successful in school.



*Barbara meeting with Scholars*

### Curriculum for Elementary School Students and Regional Teachers

First Unitarian Church's curriculum development committee prepared a lesson plan and purchased supplies for a teach-the-teacher session. Twenty teachers from seven schools attended the three hour lesson in art, social studies and ecology. Due to the lateness in the school year, many teachers were over-committed and the schools sent one or two teachers from their district.

The teachers engaged in a mindfulness activity as they prepared to draw their family, and then used watercolors to paint their drawing. Once completed, each teacher shared one brief sentence about their painting, experiencing the feeling of affirmation of their work. Teachers summarized their learning and identified the many ways they could use this lesson plan to extend their curriculum. Following the structured session, teachers engaged in the practice of using English words to describe their family painting. This part of the lesson is always filled with laughter and joy as English words are sometimes very difficult to pronounce.



*Barbara teaching English with Honduran teachers*

Barbara and Phil conducted six teaching sessions of the children drawing and then using watercolor paint to embellish their family picture. All grades from San Jose engaged in the activity. El Salitre and Guanacaste sent children for Fluoride treatment followed by the painting session. Then finally Roney Amaya presented pictures from his Portillon classroom students as a demonstration of how he learned from the teach-the-teacher session and applied it in his classroom.

First Unitarian Church of Rochester, 220 S Winton Road, will host a 3 week exhibition of these “our families” watercolor paintings from November 14-December 3. The opening will be held on November 19 at 10:30 a.m. Common hours of availability are Monday - Thursday 10-4 (ring the doorbell), Wednesday 5:00-7:30 p.m. and Sunday 9-2. Call 585 271-9070 to confirm availability. In addition, the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service will be held at First Unitarian Church @ 11:00 am.

### **Medical Care**

About 4 weeks before we left for Honduras, the UR Graduate Medical Education Office and the UR Legal Department decided we cannot treat patients in Honduras unless we have malpractice insurance in Honduras. Our current malpractice insurance only covers clinical work in the US. Therefore we have nothing to report about clinical care in San Jose. It was quite challenging to run into people while out hiking or having meetings and people were asking us for medical treatment for specific problems they had but we were unable to use our skills as physicians. Hopefully this issue will have a solution before our May trip.



*Student and her painting of her family*

### **Dental Care**

Curative Dental Care

Roger was able to join our group this trip. Given he is not part of the University of Rochester he was able to treat patients. As always, Roger was very busy. He treated about 100 patients. Extractions of

teeth due to advanced tooth decay is the most common intervention. Roger also filled smaller cavities and did some restoration work to improve aesthetics and function. Access to dental care remains a huge problem in Honduras. In addition to lack of access to dentists in the area, most San Jose people cannot afford the cost for even tooth extractions when Roger is not in San Jose.

**Fluoride Varnish**

This trip we had the children walk to San Jose from the Salitre school and the Guanacaste school so we could fluoride varnish their teeth. We just learned that the government has started applying a fluoride treatment to school children so we will no longer need to do this intervention in the future.

		
<p><i>Roger treating a child. So many children suffer with painful dental problems</i></p>	<p><i>Roger making friends even after performing procedures that can be painful and frightening</i></p>	<p><i>Fluoride varnish being applied to school children's teeth</i></p>

Health Educational

On this trip, we took a day to meet with local adolescent school children to discuss puberty and sexual health. On the day of the event, about 20 children (boys and girls) were brought by their parents to meet with us. Once we briefed the kids about the topics, we separated the boys and girls into different rooms along with the male and female group leaders. While in the rooms, we began by instructing each kid to write down a question they had related to sexual health. This allowed students the chance to freely ask without the fear of judgement from other students. The questions ranged from sexually transmitted diseases to how pregnancies occur. As we began to discuss these topics, the curiosity surrounding sexual health was apparent from the level of interaction amongst the students. It was exciting to see how many students desired to take personal interest in their health which made it easier for us to keep them engaged. By the end we had a productive conversation with the students before handing them back to their parents.

This experience was meaningful not only to the students but to the staff as well as it allowed us to connect with the students on a more personal level. In addition, it allowed us to hopefully make an impact in the future of the community's health. Though the product of our efforts may not have been noticeable at the time, the relationships we have built with the young students will be evident in the visits to come. [Ron]

**Given our inability to see patients and report about patient encounters and medical home visits, we will present a more personal accounting of the cross-cultural experience.**

In many ways I find the San Jose trip very instructive for the residents beyond any clinical knowledge they learn. It helps them gain perspective for what we do in the US compared to how much of humanity lives. It often reignites their passion for medicine and the desire to help others. It is a time for introspection, and often a chance to heal from some of the challenges that occur in the medical education process. [Doug].

## **Shea's Report on the Honduran Experience**

### Kitchen work

Melissa and Ana, a fantastic sister team, worked the longest hours and had the hardest job throughout our stay in San Jose. They were up preparing breakfast (desayuno) before the sun and were cleaning up the kitchen while the rest of us settled in for the evening (despues de la cena). I spent some time learning about tortilla-making from them in the kitchen, sweating from the heat of the fogon (wood fired stove used by folks in the San Jose area). I tried my hand at their staple, a corn tortilla, as well as the delicious though more labor-intensive flour tortilla. I learned that adding milk versus water can change the texture, and there is far more skill than meets the eye when it comes to forming a perfectly round tortilla ready to go onto the fogon. Melissa and Ana made it look easy. After a while, I was brave enough to try my hand at placing the flour tortillas onto the hot surface. Many misshapen and unevenly cooked tortillas later, I was proud of the final product and grateful for the chance to learn from the experts.



*Shea with Melissa and Ana. Melissa holds a tortilla made by Shea*

### San Marcos Trip

Barbara and Phil graciously invited me to join them on a trip to San Marcos as they were invited to represent the Unitarian Church in Rochester by attending the end-of-year dance and theater competition among local schools. A motor taxi came to pick us up in San Jose Centro and took us up to El Rancho. From there, we rode in a car down to San Marcos, which was a bit down the main road and down into a valley. I imagine it would have been more than an hour's trip by foot. Our first stop was the local high school, where students who receive scholarships from the church are working towards their bachillerato. Barbara met with the principal to discuss how the scholarship students are doing, to identify areas where additional support could help, and to plan for the future. The principal had a big, energetic personality and a joyful laugh that made my role as pseudo-interpreter far less stressful. Next, we made a stop so I could take a quick look at the clinic in San Marcos, the closest health care center for people in San Jose. The staff there generously gave some of their time and energy to show me around and explain the services they can offer. The clinic works hard to serve 22 local communities, with some patients walking 3 hours each way to access care. Their 2 doctors, 3 nurses, 1 dentist, and 2 social workers care for many pregnant patients, older adults, and children. The clinic does face barriers like medication and supply shortages, and many folks who



*Lunch is Ready!*

access care there have trouble paying for medications they need. The doctor who has served this community for several decades shared that they have seen a recent uptick in infant and maternal mortality in the last calendar year, with 14 infant deaths in the local area since January. He named infection, diarrhea, and congenital birth defects as leading causes of death based on what he's been seeing. We discussed the kind of messaging he hopes to communicate to new parents about what to look for if they worry their baby may be sick, and agreed that we can work on spreading that information to the folks we meet along the way.



*Educational play performed by the students*



*Boys and girls line up for a traditional dance*



*Dance partners in traditional Spanish dress*

Next, we crossed the street and went to the second floor of a local community building for the end-of-year dance and theatre competition. There were elementary, middle, and high school students from various communities who were there and ready to go, already in full costume (and some in full makeup) to participate in the competition. They had prepared chairs for Barbara, Phil and me in the front row. They started the event off with the Honduran national anthem, followed by the US national anthem as a generous offering of welcome to the three of us. We then enjoyed a few hours worth of traditional Honduran music and dances followed by theatre productions, one of which chronicled the journey of a Honduran father as he made a dangerous journey north towards the US-Mexico border. I had the chance to chat with some of the students in between performances, who laughed at my funny accent and taught me about the traditional dress and dance. It felt like a big honor to watch these students show their community what they had been working on.

Hike to Portillon

Two trips ago, the team heard of a young parent (17 yo) who had died just days after giving birth to her son, likely from a postpartum infection in her uterus. Since then, our UR team has made the hike down towards the communities of Mangal and Portillon to check in on this little one and bring some donated formula that he can drink in lieu of breast milk. This hike (or daily commute, as many community members might call it) requires about 1500 feet of elevation gain on the return trip. The way down is almost entirely down hill. Thank goodness we chose a day that was not all that sunny, and even had some rain showers sprinkled throughout our trek. Even so, I finished off 3 liters of



*Portillon hikers*

water to keep up with how much I was sweating. We made it to the home of the 1-year-old who looked healthy, happy, and sleepy from his nap in his grandmother's arms with several uncles hanging around to help out too. Areas of the road to Portillon had been paved in recent years which seemed to make the journey a little easier, though not any less steep!

### **Yoni's Report on the Honduran Experience**

I had the honor of returning to San Jose for now the second time. What struck me most initially was how familiar everything felt. I remembered a lot of the faces and they remembered me. I knew I wanted to go back at one point to see Maria Gloria, a mom of four, who runs a business empire on her own. On the first day, we went up to Doug's Point, where you could see a view of the whole valley. As we got there, I saw Maria Gloria from afar walking home. She was just like I remembered her, in the same hat, flip flops casually walking up the mountain with a big smile. She remembered me immediately. I speak no Spanish, but we immediately hugged like old friends. We agreed that we would come visit her the following weekend. I was able to guide us back to the meeting point, about 45 minutes away from her house. We got there and waited, but she was not there. We eventually decided to try to make it on our own. I have not been there since May, but I remember it being down the valley. I remembered certain points because they were where I fell the last time. I remembered the beautiful banana trees, and I knew they were a sign that we were close. We eventually made it, and it was everything I remember it was. She has a beautiful home in the middle of the valley with a farm that produces coffee, cashews, fruits, peppers, filled with turkeys, puppies, and chickens. She decided to take us deeper into the valley to show us things we did not get to see last time. She moved so effortlessly through the steep mountain. She showed us where she gets all her water for her crops. She also showed us a fence she built on her own, which she said took 2-3 months. She told us she did this the way I talk about completing a simple errand. She took us back to the house and offered us food. Her daughter kept talking about how amazing her mom is. She said she would bring us coffee to take back, though refused to allow us to carry any. We had to leave because it was soon (in two hours) going to be dark. It took us about two hours to get back home, where we had to stop many times to catch our breath, eat food, and buy Gatorade. The next day she came for a business meeting with Dr. Douglas to discuss how much coffee she would have us take back. She came in her nice shoes, purse, and an umbrella. I have a feeling she did not need to stop at all along the way. She left as it got dark and walked off into the sunset.



*Maria Gloria standing by the rock wall that she built*



*Amazing sunset at the Volunteer house during a rain storm*

A few days later I got to meet Maria Gloria's Mom, Cipriana. She is the matriarch of the family and the town of San Jose. Nothing happens in San Jose without Cipriana knowing. We walked up and she welcomed us with open arms. She was so excited to share her story, culture, and people. She had kids from the community with her, probably coming for her wisdom, similarly to us. She has a beautiful home along the main road, open to the whole community. There are beautiful flowers with a view overlooking the valley. The birds are singing, the cats are meowing, kids are laughing with the radio playing in the background. She has lived there since she was 19. She had endless stories about everyone from town, who now help take care of her as she gets older. She had the biggest smile throughout. I walked away feeling like I met the Queen.

To meet three generations from the same family was a really profound experience. When I think of what matters to me most in life, I think of happiness. Cipriana carries a deep happiness in the house she built, surrounded by a community she loves. Her daughter Maria Gloria carries that same happiness through a similarly beautiful home, family, and career. They work every day, have never had running water, only recently had electricity though certainly no phone, TV, or a car. I am not sure if they have ever left San Jose. Maria's son is now studying engineering. He will likely eventually leave to a city. He will likely have running water, electricity, phone, and a car. He may travel and see the world outside Honduras. He will not have to walk an hour just to get to another house. He will likely enter the same rat race we live in. I wonder what happiness will look like for him and what lessons he will draw from his mom and grandmother that will shelter him from this race.

## **Rural Development Projects**

### *Fogons (cook stoves)*

The cook-stoves we designed years ago remain one of the most popular interventions. Over the past 6 months another 8 stoves were built. We bought enough materials this trip to build 12 more cook-stoves. The stoves reduce smoke exposure in the home, reduce burn risk, and use less firewood than an open fire.

### *Pilas*

Pilas are cement water storage tank/kitchen sink/laundry area made on-site. Many people cannot afford the \$125 in materials to build a pila. Since we started subsidizing pila construction many more people have built pilas in their home. Our foreman, Edys, helped complete another 11 pilas since May and we purchased enough materials to build another 10 pilas in the coming months.

### *Latrines*

Edys helped complete 5 latrines since May. We bought enough materials this trip to build another 8 latrines.

### *Water Filters*

Most of the water people use in the area for drinking is contaminated and can lead to diarrhea, especially in children. Many years ago we introduced ceramic water filters that are made in Honduras. In September we ran out of filters. This trip we had 150 more filters delivered to San Jose from about 7 hours drive away. Edys sold 6 filters in the past 6 months. While we were in San Jose we sold another 4 filters. Given this relatively small investment reduces diarrhea in children and possibly reduces childhood deaths, it is money well spent.

### *Barrels and Gutters*

Edys gave out 12 barrels and PVC pipe to make a gutter. We gave out 3 more while in San Jose and bought 15 more barrels.

### *Solar Electricity*

A significant proportion of the people living in the communities we have partnered with do not have access to electricity from the government/electric company. Part of the reason is because of the cost to a home owner, but mostly because the houses are so widely spaced apart along rugged mountains that the electric company does not find installing wires in the region cost effective. Having no electricity means these people are in the dark from about 6 pm when the sun sets until about 5 am when the sun rises. Even during the day the inside of homes can be quite dark. Additionally, people have no way to charge their cell phones. A few years ago a company installed simple solar electric systems into a limited number of interested homes. Although recipients found the intervention transformative, only a small number of houses benefited from the intervention.

As of November 2023, we have installed 21 systems and have enough supplies in San Jose to install another 8. Doug installed 6 systems in September during a vacation visit to San Jose. This trip there was so much rain that hiking the mountain trails seemed too dangerous to do many installs. A limited number of interpreters also reduced the number of installs this trip. Therefore, we only got one system installed and 2 previously installed solar systems evaluated after the owners damaged the systems.

The systems we have designed are quite simple. The homeowner gets a solar panel, battery, associated wires and controller, 4 LED light bulbs, and the ability to charge devices using a USB plug. The system costs us about \$500 not including shipping costs. The home owner pays about \$42 for the system. We do the installation, following a required education class. Reports from prior solar system installations have been very positive. Word has spread about the solar program with about 125 people on a waiting list. The hardest part for many of the installs will be hiking to remote locations on very steep mountain sides. We have started training a Honduran to do these distant installs.

### **Agriculture**

Coffee harvest starts around mid November and ends in January-February. The coffee we brought home this trip is mainly from last year's harvest. We will have about 50 lbs of Lempira organic, 8 pounds of Lempira (which will be dark roasted), and about 35 pounds of Indio for sale in the next few weeks. The coffee that Doug sold earlier this year returned about \$12/lb compared to \$2.45 they would make if sold locally. The Farm to Table approach really helps these hard working local farmers. Thank you for supporting this effort.

### **Update on Project Status** (updated 11/8/2023)

<b>Project</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>Project</b>	<b>Completed</b>
Cook stoves	432	Scholarships	175+ students, 36 current scholars
Filters	559	Fluoride varnish	82 children this trip
Latrines	199	Fish farms	6
Pilas	232	Piped water systems	5 communities
Heirloom seeds	>18,000 given	Barrels and gutters	>55

Solar systems	21		
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**Your Help is Needed**

We believe in low cost, simple technology solutions that the Hondurans can learn and maintain on their own. We are doing a great job in this respect. However, even simple interventions cost money. To continue the exceptional work we are doing in Honduras, we need more funds. If you have the financial ability and appreciate the great improvements our activities are bringing to rural Hondurans, please take a minute and donate to our project. Donations are tax deductible if you itemize your taxes. We are very fortunate to have the assistance of the Department of Family Medicine and dedicated volunteers to almost eliminate overhead expenses. Therefore, your donation will reach the Hondurans and not be spent on less helpful expenses such as rent for a dedicated US office or US-based secretarial support. If you would like to donate to the San Jose project, please make a check payable to “HH Foundation – GH Fund HFM”. Mail the check to “Highland Family Medicine 777 Clinton Ave, South Rochester, NY 14620. Attn: Douglas Stockman”.

**Summary**

The greater Rochester Family Medicine community has touched so many lives in Honduras and the Hondurans have enriched so many of our lives. As is true for all development projects, there will be setbacks. These are learning opportunities and allow us to improve future interventions. This cross-cultural project is realizing huge benefits for everyone involved, even with a few setbacks. The scholarship students gain confidence as well as a chance for a path out of poverty. Seeing the smiles and appreciation as people display their running water, new cook-stove, or water filter is so rewarding. Through these very intimate person-to-person exchanges we maintain hope that a better world will become a reality one community at a time. Thanks to everyone for their continued support to make this project such a great success.

Douglas Stockman, MD  
 Director, Global and Refugee Health



*Front row: Shea Kelly-Buckley, Ryan Cummings, Paulet Fugon, Leo Iglesias  
Back row: Ronald Roseman, Ana Rivera, Diego Fugon, Doug Stockman, Melissa Rivera, Roger Carroll, Barbara Gawinski, Phil Stern, Yoni Abres*

### **Other Photos from Trip**



*A full bus heading to San Jose*



*Community Meeting at start of trip*



*Yoni and Melissa making bread*



*Ron and Yoni on a hiking photo-shoot*



*Roger handing out soccer balls*



*Evening talk after dinner. Barbara teaching yoga.*