

The Vargas International Teaching Award Report, 2016

Submitted by, Aviva Wolff, EdD, OT, CHT

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” Nelson Mandela

Through the generous support of the American Association for Hand Surgery (AAHS) and Hand Surgery Enowment (HSE) Vargas award, I was afforded the opportunity to participate in the Guatemala Healing Hands Foundation’s (GHHF) 11th mission to Guatemala this past November. GHHF was founded by Lynn Bassini, in an effort to improve the quality and availability of health care, specifically for the treatment of congenital and hand injuries through education and clinical care. Lynn is a source of endless inspiration and a true embodiment of humanitarianism at its best.

On November 1st, after 18 months of hard work and planning, the volunteer group lead by Lynn and Mona Lipson departed JFK International airport with 42 bags of medical supplies and donations. Volunteers from Canada and other parts of the US brought additional supplies and met up with the group in Guatemala City. Over the course of 12 days: 53 children were operated on, 95 hand therapy patients were seen, 70 orthotics were fabricated and over 250 local clinicians participated in educational conferences and workshops. Throughout the 12 days, a well orchestrated, coordinated and multifaceted approach was executed to fulfill all aspects of the GHHF mission: Education, Clinical Care (therapy and surgery), and Community Development.

Education

Over 200 local physical therapists, students, and surgeons attended the bilingual 11th International Congress of Hand Surgery and Therapy in Guatemala City on November 4th. The resulting success is credited to the joint efforts of the talented speakers and the co-sponsoring organizations: GHHF, AAHS, HSE, The Touching Hands Project, Integra Foundation, Asociacion Guatemaltica De Cerugia De La Mano, and Asociacion Guatemaltica De Terapeutas De La Mano. This year’s program was titled: Peripheral Nerve Injury: Innovations in Surgery and Therapy. I participated in the program that was composed of lectures and panel discussions delivered by surgeons and therapists. We covered a wide range of topics including nerve compression syndromes, nerve trauma, brachial plexus reconstruction, and thoracic outlet syndrome.

In addition to the congress, I taught at several of the daily educational workshops and orthosis labs at the hotel. These smaller sessions were designed for local therapists and students to attend, and learn about specific conditions. Topics addressed this year included TFCC Injury, Thumb Anatomy and Biomechanics, and Extensor Tendon Injury. Participants had the opportunity to fabricate wrist, thumb and relative motion orthoses. One morning was also devoted to patient cases, where participants presented cases to therapists for guidance and discussion. Additionally, one volunteer member of our group, Dr. Paul Velleman, a well-known Cornell Statistician, gave a lecture on interpreting medical literature at the Herrera Llerandi Hospital.



I also spent several afternoons during the week teaching students and therapists with seasoned professor extraordinaire, Dr. Susan Michlovitz, at the Hospital Centro Medico. We covered the anatomy of the upper extremity and hand therapy evaluation techniques, and conducted a palpation lab.



An important note: Returning volunteers found that local students and clinicians were more knowledgeable than on previous visits, demonstrating both the efficacy of the GHF interventions and educations programs, and the importance of consecutive missions to the same location to reinforce this information.

Clinical Care

Screening Day

Screening day took place at the Moore Pediatric Center. Although this was probably the longest and busiest day of the trip, it was extraordinarily efficient, well organized and productive. We set up an assembly line fashion of stations (Triage screening, photo-imaging, surgical consult, anesthesia, medical clearance, scheduling, etc.), while non-medical volunteers entertained and played with the children. I was one of the escorts assigned to assist patients and their families to navigate through the stations, providing me with a crash course in congenital hand anomaly management, and surgical decision making. I also received a lesson in Guatemalan patience, grace, and charm. In all, over 120 patients were screened, and 53 booked for surgery. 8 patients required bilateral intervention, and 95 patients were scheduled for hand therapy treatment sessions. A wide range of cases were seen including various congenital anomalies (such as syndactyly, polydactyly, radial club hand, cleft hand, amniotic band syndrome, madelung's deformity), burn contractures, and deformities secondary to trauma and malunion.

Surgery and Therapy

Clinical care was provided at various sites throughout the city over a 5-day span. Surgery was performed daily at the Moore Pediatric Surgery Center. A large group of physicians, nurses, and non-medical volunteers ensured the 3 operating rooms were set-up and running smoothly and efficiently all week. Therapists saw scheduled patients at the Moore Clinic for evaluations, home instruction, and orthoses. I had the opportunity to fabricate soft post-operative splints for syndactyly releases, and a wide range of post-operative orthoses. I received another crash course, this time in creativity and improvisation by utilizing available supplies, mostly scraps and cast-offs from our first world clinics. Language translational services were provided by a group of outstanding local college students, ensuring that home exercises and post-operative care instructions were well understood.

Therapists also visited 5 additional hospitals and clinics (Roosevelt Burn Center, University Clinics, IGSS, Roosevelt Hospital, San Juan de Dios) where they consulted on patient cases throughout the week. This provides an opportunity for joint problem solving with local practitioners, demonstration of techniques and splinting



skills, and discussion of treatment progression. I had the opportunity to visit both Roosevelt Hospital, and a private hand clinic run by Marta Beatriz Pineda, PT. At both sites, therapists presented cases to me and Dr Sue Michlovitz for consultation and discussion, including a hand transplant patient. The graciousness, eagerness and thirst for knowledge by the students and clinicians made a striking impression.

We were all impressed with the level of skill and knowledge of the local practitioners, who have clearly incorporated knowledge learned from previous missions into their practice.

Community Development

Several years ago, GHHF adopted the village of Chichoy Alto, a small impoverished community in the mountains, with little connection to the outside world. Over the years, GHHF has been addressing the needs of Chichoy by building latrines and stoves, and funding and building a school for the children. Through GHHF individuals sponsor education past 9th grade for targeted children to attend technical school. This year the project was to build new desks for the new school renovation. 50 double wide desks were built for the students by non-medical volunteers, and with the help of local children and adults.



On a personal level, I want to acknowledge and express my gratitude to the AAHS and HSE for affording me this opportunity. The Vargas award is a gift that keeps giving. In 1998, Lynn Bassini was awarded a Vargas award and travelled with Alan Freeland to Venezuela. That trip was the inspiration for GHHF now with 11 completed successful missions. Each mission builds on the work of the previous missions. Each mission leads to new initiatives identified by participants and locals that give birth to additional projects. Each mission inspires countless volunteers to continue to forge ahead and educate, teach, and make tangible changes and real differences. I thank the Vargas committee for this gift, for enabling me to experience this wonder and contribute in a small and impactful way to this very large and powerful endeavor.

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