

AAHS Vargas International Teaching Report 2013

“The purpose of life is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience.”

— [Eleanor Roosevelt](#)

My hope is that this report finds everyone happy and healthy in this New Year! I recently returned from Guatemala as the American Association of Hand Surgery (AAHS) and Hand Surgery Endowment (HSE), 2013 Vargas International Teaching Awardee. On this trip, I traveled with Guatemala Healing Hands Foundation's (GHHF) group of 50, which included surgeons, therapists, nurses, anesthesiologists, physician assistants and members of their family. GHHF is the vision and passion of Lynne Bassini, the 1998 Vargas Awardee to Venezuela. Her dedication to this superbly organized 2 week multi-faceted program, her ongoing educational, medical and community sponsorship is truly inspirational.



I was pleased to be a part of the well-received X International Congress of Surgery and Therapy of the Hand held in Guatemala City, sponsored by GHHF, AAHS, HSE, Asociacion Guatemalteca De Cirugia De La Mano and Asociacion Guatemalteca De Terapeutas De La Mano. Members of our group delivered lectures on management of the stiff upper extremity, brachial plexus palsy, and tendon transfers. Marta Beatriz Pineda, PT, and Jose Borrero, MD shared insight into Guatemalan hand therapy and the history of brachial plexus surgery. Dr. Gastova Lopez Paz welcomed us and shared his tribute to Dr. Harold Kleinert.

I learned that Guatemalan therapists have a very difficult time obtaining the materials we take for granted in our day to day work. Thanks to the generosity of many, GHHF made it possible for the local therapists to obtain donated goods such as splint and casting materials and prefabricated braces at a nominal price. Throughout the week, workshops on the topics of Dupuytren's, flexor tendon and postop care of rotator cuff injuries extended the educational opportunities for the Guatemalan therapists who travel distances to attend. Sue Michlovitz and I also taught at Hospital Centro Medico 3 afternoons covering topics on modalities, extensor tendon anatomy & management by zone and other diagnoses common to the hand and upper extremity. All educational sessions were translated both ways which enriched our educational exchange.



I do not know if Lynn Bassini was aware when she assigned me to Roosevelt Hospital Burn Center and inpatient Occupational Therapy Department, but both settings felt like I was 'going home'. My interest in hands was peaked 30-some years ago while working at an inner city County General Hospital and adult burn center. My early experience on





the burn unit was what sent me to graduate school Hand Management Program at the Medical College of Virginia under the mentorship of Wyndell Merritt, MD. I truly felt that I had come full circle and this allowed me to enjoy this exchange of information, to deeply appreciate and admire how skilled these burn team members were with so few resources. I was also able to share and understand their delight with the new burn care facility which will house the entire burn team under one roof in the near future!

The Roosevelt inpatient OT Department presented

patients to Gretchen Kaiser, Sue Michlovitz, John Indalecio, and me. Traveling to the hospital, our team had a great discussion about the impression we perhaps were giving the local therapists about the practice of hand therapy. Some of us had observed, as we carried our thermoplastics and splint pan into their departments, that we might be giving these therapists the impression that Hand Therapists only make orthotics. So for this particular visit, we brought out our evaluation skills, measurement tools including an IFSHT donated dynamometer, exercises, written home exercise programs. What resulted was a great dialogue regarding how the measurements determined treatment and how these can be used to assess the effectiveness of the intervention. We emphasized the use of orthotics as only one tool in our toolbox!



Concurrent to the educational events, our team staffed the Moore Pediatric Center for 6 days. Day 1 was Screening Day, during this time 130 children with congenital hand defects were evaluated. I was fortunate to be an escort which gave me firsthand experience of this well-oiled machine. An escort accompanies each patient and family through the screening process. Literally while on the run the patient's history is obtained, functional needs and wishes are clarified, and families reassured. The is done while going through a series of stations that

included a quick screen to determine need for surgery or therapy, photos & registration, vitals, surgical consultation with pre-op photos, and anesthesiology consult. Knowing nothing about congenital hand defects, Spanish, or treating kids, I can tell you it



works because everyone was there to make it happen! To enjoy this opportunity to the fullest, I leaned on the volunteer translators, used sign language, laughter, hugs, and the feeling of camaraderie. The opportunity to observe internationally known hand surgeons exam a child and in under 10 minutes make decisions regarding what will be done, when, how and decide the equipment needed for surgery in such a collegial way was heartwarming, and a major learning experience for me.

Sixty-one surgeries were done in 5 days, 116 patients were seen for therapy and 127 orthotics were fabricated by our team. Each morning therapists

assigned to work at the Moore Center did rounds with the surgeons. These rounds also took me back to my roots as a PT, the exchange and learning was fantastic, but I can tell you the smiles on the parent's faces and to personally see a child's eyes light up when they saw individual fingers on their hand for the first time were the best! Each day children were discharged so with the help of our translators the therapists compiled home instructions used our creativity to make orthotics for the kids who were still in their postoperative casts. In 3 weeks these orthotics would be brought back and applied by the Moore Center follow-up team.



GHHF has adopted the town of Chichoy Alto located in Patzun, Chimaltenango and I had the privilege to tag along. The village welcomed us by having a single child hold our hand, present us with a flower, and walk us down a path of pine needles into their Village Center. Music, colorful



garb and anticipation filled the air; it was truly a day of celebration for this village. We had come prepared to do construction on the school house. Instead the villagers came out of their fields for the day, toted enough clay bowls to feed hundreds to village center, and prepare a rich vegetable beef soup, tamales and tortillas for all! Tears, smiles and hard to describe emotions filled everyone in that Village Center and served as a powerful bond, which reminded us to enjoy the celebration and each other that day. Overwhelmed



by these emotions, we asked the villagers to let us serve them the soup, it was heartwarming to see the children lined up first, then the women finally the men. There are many tales to tell of Chichoy Alto, including how individual members of AAHS are reaching out to these villagers, stop any of us at any time to ask about the work ongoing or contact www.guatemalahands.org

I sincerely wish to thank AAHS, HSE, and GHHF for having the confidence in me to represent the intent of the Vargas Award. In the late 1980's I had the personal privilege to meet Dr. Vargas, share time with him and learn of his vision for surgeon-hand therapist teams to travel to under-served countries. Being a part of this history

made traveling under the Vargas award a much richer experience for me. I also am certain that the work that Lynn Bassini is doing in Guatemala would have made Dr. Vargas very proud, because it goes beyond what he ever imagined!



My Vargas trip was the most gratifying experience of my life; I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Julianne W Howell, PT, MS, CHT

Picture 1 The AAHS /HSE Vargas trip to Guatemala 2013 in collaboration with GHHF. Look for many people you know!

Picture 2 Lisa Cyr, Amy Turner and Juli Howell networking during conference day break.

Picture 3 Donated goods being organized for sale by our versatile group of men!

Picture 4 Roosevelt Burn Unit with Juli and Otty Chin Hernández, OT with a young patient.

Picture 5 Tour of Roosevelt Hospital's new Burn Unit with Otty, Director, Lourdes Santiso, MD, therapy students, Sue Michlovitz, Juli Howell, Becky von der Hyde and Kirk Turner.

Picture 6 Roosevelt inpatient OT department therapists Luisa Mota, Evelin Palacios, Virginia Rivera and Àngela Núñez with Sue Michlovitz, John Indalecio, Juli Howell, Gretchen Bachman and David Williams.

Picture 7 Escort's Amy Turner and Juli Howell enjoying their job!

Picture 8. Surgeons Mark Baratz, Scott Kozin, Miguel Pirela-Cruz, Francisco Soldado and Andrew Moore deep in thought during Moore Pediatric Center surgical consultation with young child.

Picture 9 Our much-loved "jefa" of the Moore Center Therapy Room, Sharon Andruskiwec prepares orthotics for this little girl who had syndactaly releases.

Picture 10. Chichoy Alto welcoming ceremony with children lining the pine needle path to the village.

Picture 11. The village women honored Lynn Bassini wearing a hand embroidered wepil, she gets a hug from Zulma Joj who's education was sponsored by GHHF, and now returns to her village to be their first nurse.

Picture 12 Gretchen Bachman and Juli Howell serving soup to the villagers.