



Submitted photo

Dr. Michael Elmore, middle, wearing blue shirt, pauses with medical team members during visit to a town in Guatemala on a brief break from their mission.

Medical team brings hope and healing to Guatemala

By JOHN-JOSEPH JOHANSSON

Dr. Michael Elmore never gets used to his first day back at work after a vacation. His vacations, however, are unlike the summertime holidays of most Southsiders. Every year, Elmore travels through Central America with a medical missions team that provides free health care and spiritual healing to grateful communities.

"Coming back to my job is dangerous," explained Elmore, a gastro-intestinal specialist at St. Francis Hospital and Health Centers. "Sometimes, I just want to say, 'Shut up' when people here complain about medical service. They have no idea how the rest of the world lives."

Elmore's latest trip took him and 35 team members to San Marcos, Guatemala, and surrounding regions from May 31 to June 7. The trip was made possible through several businesses and organizations, including Ambassador Travel Club, Ambassadors for Children, Habitat for Humanity, and the Southside-based People Helping People network. The Community Church of Greenwood and Indian Creek Christian Church also sent workers and funds.

There are around 60,000 residents in San Marcos, but almost 300,000 people live in the surrounding area. As a doctor of endoscopy, Elmore cared for the gastro-intestinal ailments of villagers who often lined up two hours before the morning clinics began.

Elmore's team included local and national medical practitioners; special-



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Physical therapist Jonny Locklear of St. Francis Hospital and Health Centers kneels to help a patient at a mission in Guatemala.

hungry or in need of shelter."

Jenny Locklear, an occupational therapist from St. Francis Hospital who traveled with Elmore, added, "You could see the difference in the faces of the people after the team left a village. The people there were so appreciative of any help that we could give them, whether it was medical aid, praying and talking with them or just playing with the kids. We may not have been able to treat all their problems but we had at least given them hope."

The group built shelters for earthquake and volcano survivors with Habitat for Humanity during the first two days of June. The next day,

Most residents had never seen a doctor until Elmore's team arrived.

"Most don't understand how hygiene affects their health," Elmore observed. "They live with their animals in dirt floor homes and there is poor-to-no sanitation."

He displayed a photograph of three ramshackle outhouses: "These are the nice facilities. You don't want to see the others. Most of the medical problems could be solved if the people had clean water and bathrooms."

The team mostly treated infectious diseases, parasites and bacteria. Elmore described the Guatemalan health system as a shambles.

"There is no one here to prevent the

Elmore has learned since his first trip that word among townspeople spreads quickly when the medical teams arrive.

In 1989, he was operating on patients at a clinic in San Marcos when local doctor Julio Fuentes dropped in to study Elmore's endoscopic procedures. Fuentes told Elmore that he runs, stocks and staffs his own hospital with a bare minimum of supplies and assistance.

Once a month Fuentes holds a free clinic for locals who cannot afford any other aid.

Lifelong friendship

Despite lacking a common language, Elmore and Fuentes became quick friends. The Southside doctor soon realized that doctors in Central America are poorly educated and under-equipped for emergency situations. When a local doctor runs out of supplies, patients are not referred to another doctor or a national hospital. The patients are simply turned away.

Fuentes became Elmore's contact for further trips to Central America.

In April 1990, St. Francis Hospital donated endoscopic equipment that he later delivered to Fuentes on his second trip.

Elmore said, "When our team gets there, Julio smiles and says, 'Now my work can begin.' He has a great heart for his people."

Because of their plight

Elmore described one encounter, among many from his experiences, that he will never forget. His team had spent a day working at clinics in a remote area of Peru. The sun was setting below the mountains, and the local missionary advised the team to return to their base before nightfall. He announced to the line of villagers still waiting outside Elmore's clinic that the doctors would only be able to treat one member of each family before they had to leave. He remembers one mother who stepped through the door with five children behind her.

"We can only treat one of your children," he had to tell her. "You must choose one." The woman looked down the line and finally pointed to one.

"That broke my heart," he said. He paused, and then admitted, "I hope we never have to see that again."

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Elmore added, "I have fallen in love with the people and the culture, and I can honestly say that some of the best weeks of my life have been spent in those countries. I have never known anyone in the group to tell me that they didn't get as much out of the trip as they put in."

The longtime Southside doctor said, "You can't outgive God. When you commit to His work, His blessings are enormous."