

VOSH of Minnesota  
Mission: Portoviejo, Ecuador, May 2009  
Jan Cartwright

It has been one month since I have returned from my first VOSH Mission Trip. I have spent part of every day reflecting on my experience and trying to find the words to convey to family, friends and co-workers exactly how much this experience has enriched my life. I have yet to find the appropriate message to express the range of emotions I experienced during my travels and upon my return. I can only say that you have to live it to realize it. I am so thankful that I had the opportunity to encounter another country and its people in this fashion. Would I do it again? Definitely!

When I first joined the Fairhaven Lions in 2000 I was lucky to listen to a presentation from a fellow Lion member Carol Bohannon about her attendance at many VOSH missions to regions of countries where people are not fortunate to have vision care available. Upon listening to her, little did I know that I also would be privileged to have this experience.

Carol and I both planned to go on the May 2009 VOSH trip to Portoviejo, Ecuador, but unfortunately Carol was destined to have surgery shortly before the trip's departure so she reluctantly had to decline going on the mission.

I began the process of learning and working towards the mission by sorting glasses obtained by the Lions and other groups that are donated to VOSH in Crystal, MN. Glasses are sorted, classified and packed bi-monthly by volunteers, some who have been on previous VOSH missions and are eager to share their experiences. As upcoming trips become closer the excitement escalates.

Besides packing used glasses to dispense, those of us who were destined to go on the mission trip had meetings and e-mail exchanges that conveyed information on the flight, country, weather, packing, shots, etc., etc. It was all very exhilarating. Soon, all the orientation was over and we were ready to go. But, believe me no groundwork what-so-ever can prepare a person for the actual event. As I said before, you have to live it to realize it.

The initial flight to Miami, Florida and the consequent flight to Guayaquil, Ecuador were really uneventful with the exception of the 6 hour layover in Miami. Upon arriving at customs with our suitcases plus the 11 boxes of glasses, cases and gifts we were further detained for 2 hours while waiting for "paperwork" to clear. We then had a bus ride to our hotel. It was early morning before we all got to sleep. The next day after breakfast, we again boarded the bus and drove the 3 hour trip to Portoviejo, stopping along the way at the eye clinic of the President of VOSH, Ecuador, Daniel Valverde, O.D. Upon our arrival in Portoviejo we were warmly greeted by our host families, taken to their homes

to settle in and then back to the Civil Engineers Bldg. where we would set up the hall for the dispensing area.

The team consisted of 12 members from the US, led by VOSH, Minnesota President Bob Boeding and included 2 doctors. In addition there were 6 students from Canada, doctors and students from Ecuador plus Portoviejo Rotary Club members and exchange students who translated for us. The Rotary Club provided wonderful nourishing meals and beverages. We dispensed 2,025 pairs of glasses in 4 days of 10-12 hour shifts. The team was well organized and worked smoothly together during the hot, humid days. Since, I do not have an optometry background I found it to be a very challenging, rewarding, educational experience. After the doctors wrote the prescriptions, I along with others attempted to match the RX to the glasses we had brought along. Many times, this was a very difficult procedure, but our goal was to get as close as we could. The reward of the patient's ability to see more clearly was overwhelming at times. There were many exclamations of, "muchas gracias" and ever so many hugs of thanks. The heat, the constant challenging work, the stress of having to communicate in a language that I was not familiar with, thus having to use a translator the majority of the time in addition to the rewards, plus the long hours and foreign foods led to an inconsistent roller coaster of emotions that my body had to deal with.

The evenings were spent with our host families who took us into their homes and hearts as part of their family. This was truly the way to learn about another country including its people and customs.

We had a day of R&R half-way between the work days and spent the time as tourists in a seaside community. The work culminated with a "thank-you" dinner and dance. Tears of sadness at leaving and happiness of knowing all the wonderful, warm new friends that we had made in Portoviejo flowed freely at the dinner and also at the bus departure the next morning.

We then journeyed along the coast, as on vacation for 2 days before our exit from Ecuador.

I have had corrected vision for the majority of my life and I have taken the fact for granted that I could easily obtain this treatment. How humbling it makes me feel to know that I have been so fortunate to be able to help others. I treasure the pictures I took and the fond memories I have will last forever.