



Giving Back—Reluctantly

BY NICK ALCOCK

We all get invited to numerous charity events each year. Some-time we go because we want to, and other times we go because we have to. When my friend Lori asked me if she could use my country club membership to host a breakfast fundraiser for Esperança, I immediately agreed.

Lori has worked for Esperança for six years, and I've heard her talk about their international work many times. They provide volunteer surgical missions, health education, training of community health workers, home building, clean water projects, micro enterprise, agricultural development and dental treatment and prevention programs. They also send donated medical equipment and supplies to project sites around the world.

Immediately after agreeing to help her, I realized two things: (1) I would now be obligated to give her money, and worse, (2) I had to wake up early and attend this event. So when the time came for the breakfast, I waltzed in about 10 minutes late and promptly hid behind a coffee urn.

Dr. Nicholas Retson, a plastic and reconstructive surgeon from Indiana, was speaking about his medical mission trips to Third-World countries, where he performed necessary plastic surgeries on children and adults. He showed before and after pictures, and toward the end of his presentation he indicated to the audience that anyone who sponsored his trip would be able to travel with him and work in the hospital. His next trip was 10 months away, which felt like an eternity to me.

However, his presentation was incredibly moving, and I was intrigued. By the end of the breakfast, I found myself telling Lori I would sponsor an Esperança trip to Jinotega, Nicaragua with Dr. Retson.

At the time, my 3-year-old daughter was scheduled for heart surgery. Maybe I was hoping for some good karma and that's why I felt compelled to support his mission. Or maybe it's because I wanted to see firsthand how these medical mission trips worked.

Thankfully, my daughter's surgery went perfectly. The months flew by and suddenly I was boarding my flight to Nicaragua. However, my enthusiasm had diminished somewhat. As I sat on the flight, I began to realize this was no vacation. I was about to spend a week in a very distressed and impoverished town with a small dilapidated hospital.

At the airport I was met by Victorino, the local Esperança director. He drove me north of Managua through extraordinarily unremarkable countryside. The vistas were plagued with industrial coffee operations, shoeless children and litter.

Jinotega, according to Victorino, is known as the "hidden village." It is nestled into a nondescript valley at the base of the continental divide. In the era of conquistadors, the surviving indigenous population hunkered down undetected in Jinotega for more than a century.

I didn't know much about Jinotega, but day one was a real eye-opener for me. More than 150 people were packed in a small hallway outside a very small examination room. Most of the patients were young children who were disfigured by cleft lips, burns or other congenital defects. Some children were too young for surgery and would have to wait a year. Other kids had a variety of bizarre disorders that could not be remedied with the limited resources of the hospital.

Despite the number of children who couldn't be immediately helped, Dr. Retson performed nine surgeries a day, for six days. Most nights he returned back to the hotel close to midnight. His team consisted of nurses, technicians and an anesthesiologist who also

donated their time and resources to be a part of the medical mission trip. As a group, they were extremely professional and disciplined. This particular trip marked their fourth Esperança trip together as a team.

They knew what to expect. I, on the other hand, didn't realize was I was getting myself into. The despair and poverty were like nothing I could have imagined. My mental state paired very well with the emotional condition of the parents. For many of them, this too was their first time in a Nicaraguan city. Many of these good people had traveled for 10, 12 or 14 hours to come to Dr. Retson's clinic. They lived in very humble, rural villages hundreds of miles away.

During my week in Nicaragua, I visited a shantytown north of the city, where we dropped off a child who had been operated on. I was astounded by the poverty. The tiny structures the people live in were precariously constructed and covered in torn-up plastic sheeting. They lived without running water or electricity. For them, this medical mission was their best and only chance for their children.

The operations that Dr. Retson performed would cost thousands of dollars in Nicaragua. Nurses in the hospital work 90-hour weeks and make approximately \$300 per month. There is absolutely no way most rural workers in Central America could pay for such a procedure. That's why the work Esperança is doing is so important. They are providing critical and sometimes the only medical care and treatment these people will ever receive.

While on the ground in Jinotega, I couldn't help but think about my experience at the pristine and newly constructed Phoenix Children's Hospital. We received extraordinary care and were privileged to have our daughter in a clean and safe facility—quite a contrast to the hospital in Nicaragua. It didn't even have sheets on the mattresses, and there was no food for the patients. Four to five patients crowd in a

NICK ALCOCK received his undergraduate degree from U.C. Santa Barbara. He graduated from ASU with a joint J.D., M.B.A. in 1998. In 2000 he founded Alcock and Associates, PC. He lives in Phoenix with his wife and two young children.



The author with various patients and, at bottom left, with Dr. Nicholas Retson.

very small room, and the whole place smells suboptimal. I quickly decided the most useful way for me to make an impact was to purchase sheets, toys for the children and meals for everyone.

When I agreed to have the Esperança fundraising breakfast at my country club, I didn't realize what an incredible opportunity I would be getting in return. I reluctant-

ly attended the breakfast, but came home from my trip to Nicaragua with a whole new appreciation for the United States and charities like Esperança.

Dr. Retson and his team are providing extraordinary services to people who desperately need them. They work hand-in-hand with the doctors and nurses in Jinotega to ensure they are being trained

and capable of caring for the patients once they leave.

Next time a friend or colleague invites you to a fundraiser, go with an open mind. There are so many wonderful and deserving nonprofits in Arizona, like Esperança, who need our support and donations.

To learn more about Esperança, visit www.esperanca.org. 