

Mercy after Mitch Hurricane inspired grassroots help for Guatemala's poor

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Hilda Rossi left a good life in Guatemala, where her parents ran a sugar plantation, to study English in Canada in 1964, but ended up working as a domestic, looking after a family of 12 in Mississauga.

When Hurricane Mitch devastated Central America in 1998, levelling many of the poor villages in her native region, La Union, Rossi heard an inner voice saying to her, "The Lord gave you the opportunity to go to Canada, and you must do something to help."

That's when Rossi, by then working as a hospital office manager after years of taking evening classes, launched a new life as a fundraiser out of her Oakville home — holding hotdog sales and garage sales, charity dances and luncheons, as well as an annual walkathon, like the one happening in Burlington next Saturday, to collect money for her countrymen in need.

Rossi's "mom-and-pop" charity, Canadian Central American Relief Effort (CCARE), consisting of her immediate friends and their acquaintances, is a truly small non-profit, having raised just \$300,000 in the past eight years. But that's gone well beyond expectations.

"Relief groups come and go, and we didn't really expect ourselves to have lasted that long," Rossi notes. "But we can't just hand out money and give people food, then leave them behind. Relief work is a long-term commitment. We have to help them develop life skills and infrastructure to be independent."

Since 2000, CCARE has taken almost 100 Canadian volunteers from all backgrounds on seven humanitarian trips to build houses, schools, a community store and two community centres. They've donated farming equipment, held health clinics and lobbied the Guatemalan government to fund projects in the forgotten region, which is out of sight of tourists who flock to resorts elsewhere in the country. Each volunteer pays \$1,500 out of pocket to fund the 10-day trip.

Hamilton dentist Russell Grover first heard of CCARE five years ago through a United Church minister, who told him about the dire need in Guatemala for things like dental care.

The 55-year-old began collecting dental supplies such as anaesthetics, sterilizers, toothbrushes and toothpaste, and shipping them south in cargo containers ahead of a planned 10-day clinic in Guatemala.

Each day of the clinic, Grover and his assistant, wife Heidi, would get up before dawn to reach an indigenous village in the mountains, where they typically found 200 people lined up to receive care.

"We couldn't really take care of everyone and had to select the really bad ones. We would take them back to the town in a truck and work in the office of a local dentist, who donated the space," recalls Grover, who has been back three times and is now planning a similar mission to Nairobi.

"Their mouths were completely destroyed, and they'd never seen or used a toothbrush before. We started off with some simple extractions in our first year. Now we do less extraction but more restorative work, filling in teeth and a bit of 'smile makeovers,' along with education workshops on dental health."

The trip was an eye-opener for his colleague, dentist Ana Maria Gonzalez, who has seen enough poverty in her native Mexico.

"But I had never seen something that bad," notes Gonzalez, who has been one of the few much-needed Spanish speakers involved in the mission. "No electricity, no clean water and you have families with five, six kids or more with no education.

"They worry about what to eat and how to survive tomorrow, and have no time to think about their teeth. They just live with all the pain from the infection and swelling in their mouths."

Rosie DeBiasi, who met the Rossis at a local Italian club 20 years ago, said she has been impressed by her friend's commitment to the cause.

"People ask, 'Why are you helping? You are not Guatemalan,'" says the retired factory worker, who travelled to La Union with Rossi immediately after the 1998 hurricane. "But if our friends and neighbours need help, you don't ask where they are from."

DeBiasi, CCARE's co-founder, says the group has been able to reach out to only three of La Union's 36 villages, and a lot has yet to be done to rebuild the whole region.

"What we've done may seem very little, but it means a lot to the people there that we have come from far away to see them year after year, so they know they are not forgotten," she said. "It's given them hope."

Next Saturday's 5-kilometre walkathon and run starts at 9:30 a.m. at Burlington's Spencer Smith Park, near Locust St. and Lakeshore Ave. For information or to inquire about volunteering, visit <http://www.canadiancare.org/> or call 905-639-8053.

CCARE's 2007 "Images of the Merendon Mountains" calendar will be on sale in October.



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