

## *Musings of a Reluctant Volunteer...*

By Sandy *Alejandro* Shea

When I got the email from my old friend Pilar, I only skimmed it.



She was asking for volunteers for a health project for kids in Mexico. You were asked to donate 10 service days, plus money for food and gas, and probably the use of your car if you had one. No special skills were required, but you would also be asked to contribute generously of your compassion, full attention, your Spanish (such as it was), and most certainly your patience, and sense of humor. In return, you were sure to get a unique, non-

touristy perspective of life in Mexico, to do some fulfilling health work with Mexican, Tarahumara and/or Mennonite school kids, and other unspecified adventures—it's Mexico. A little voice inside me said "*Mira hombre, this is perfect for you right now.*"

I was a likely candidate: I speak some Spanish, I love Mexican culture (most of it), I had the time, and I like helping perfect strangers! Of course, I didn't listen to the little voice. I closed the message, and marked it as Unread. Weeks went by, but I always kept that 1 Unread Message, intending to read it again more thoroughly.

After about *six months*, I opened the message again. Despite news of heightened swine flu alerts and drug cartel murders, and despite all of the little projects that could potentially keep me here forever, I was ready for a change, I was curious, and hell, it was Mexico! I wrote Pilar back saying I was available and interested in volunteering with the Sierra Children's Health Project, and in mid-May I started the drive south.



It's a long drive—in all about 24 hours-- from the high country in Colorado to Santa Isabel, Chihuahua, Mexico. To break up the journey, and to get driving and border crossing information, I stopped off at Pilar's in Alpine, Texas. She informed me the other prospective volunteer had dropped out—something about a broken leg. She asked if I would feel OK going down by myself? I said no problem.

Welcome to Unpredictability, I thought. You'd better get used to it.



Making the seven-hour drive to Dr. Hector Lechuga's house was pretty simple. You have to cross the border and deal with an hour or so of permits, insurance, etc, then you're on your way south.

Don't forget your passport.

I arrived in Santa Isabel and was warmly welcomed by project head Dr. Hector Lechuga. Hector is an epidemiologist who I discovered is also an exceptional human being, so full of life and dreams and vision. This project is founded on the simple belief that early detection and simple changes in diet can have profound and long lasting positive health



effects. Illnesses such as diabetes, hypertension, anemia, etc, can largely be eliminated. He is fond of saying the recipe for health is in the kitchen, not in the pharmacy. After introductions with his family and a bite to eat, Hector took me to a rented room in Santa Isabel where I'd stay the next three nights. (The municipality supplied housing and gasoline. I supplied my car.) The next day was spent training (me) with the help of Lily, the school nutritionist at the elementary school in Riva Palacios and getting to know the general area.

Dr. Lechuga, Diana, Isaak, Patricia, y David. Throughout my stay, the whole family went out of their way to make me feel so welcome!

Essentially, this phase of the project involved working with all schools in the District to gather baseline data on all students. But for the first time, we would be working among the Mennonites who lived out on the plains to the north. For this initial screening, we weighed, measured (height and around abdomen) and took blood pressure. Secondary follow-up among overweight children (testing for cholesterol and triglycerides in addition to blood sugar and hemoglobin) would be conducted once the data had been run through a series of statistical and mathematical screens. But we were only measuring—the first step.



Since we were only two people, I did the weighing and measuring. We had a digital scale that was fast & accurate. I called out the measurements to someone—usually the teacher, who knew some Spanish though his native tongue was low German. (Yes, it was strange to be in this inner world in Mexico.)

Hector took the blood pressure, called out the numbers, administered a paleta (lollipop), and we did this through 5 different Mennonite community schools, seeing 116 students in my 10 service days. Some days we worked 8-10 hours, others only 4 hours. We made a good team.





A teacher transcribes data as fathers look on

Because this was the first entrance into this Mennonite community, it was important for the project to make a good impression and establish a high level of trust. I feel we did this, and established a good beginning in an entirely new community that can benefit tremendously from Dr. Lechuga's work.

Along the way, we met many down-home, wonderful people and made some real friends in the Mennonite community. These folks seemed glad to learn that the Sierra Children's Health Project is an independent project of volunteers, and that its services are free!



Oh, did I mention the re-creation of Pancho Villa's wedding to Luz Corral? Although not part of the project, my visit coincided with this event involving 1000's of people, held in Riva Palacio. Hector invited me to go with his family, a real treat.





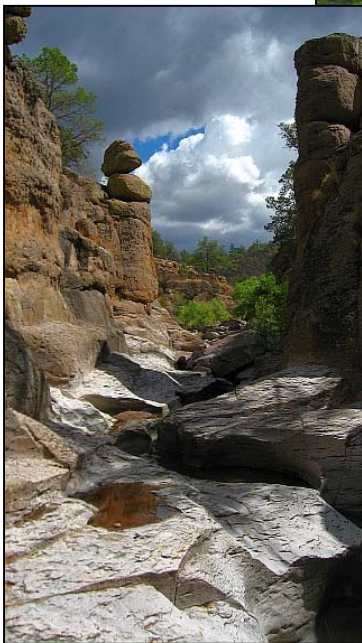
VERY COOL!



QUE PADRE!

So, it wasn't all work. I was treated to many great meals with Hector and his family (*gracias*, Patricia). I also attended a great birthday party of a neighbor of the Lechuga's, did a 600-mile drive with Hector and the boys to ***La Zona del Silencio***, and had the chance to share some of my life experiences with Patricia's high school classes. A full 10 days!

The daily commute...



This was an incredibly worthwhile experience due to the warmth and friendship of Dr. Hector Lechuga and his family. *Gracias por todo, amigos. Espero que nos vemos muy pronto.*

Thanks also go to leaders of the municipal government of Riva Palacios for their generous support of the Sierra Children's Health Project.