

Mid-Life Mission

Leawood dentist brings first-time healthcare to thousands in Guatemala.

words CISLEY THUMMEL

On his days off, 64-year-old dentist Alan Barber looks a lot like his Leawood peers. Clad casually in jeans and a pullover, graying temples bordering wise and kind eyes peek out from under his well-worn ball cap. From all outward appearances, Barber blends in with his contemporaries—save for the bracelet on his wrist.

The band is brightly colored and tightly woven and its vibrant blues, reds, and yellows seem to encircle his arm with just the right fit. “The kids made it for me,” he smiles when asked for its story. “You should have seen how carefully they tied it on my wrist.”

The “kids” of which Barber talks are just a few of the more than 14,000 Guatemalan children he’s cared for through the organization he started 11 years ago, True North Missions. True North provides healthcare for underserved children and their families in Central America. Barber and his teams of doctors, nurses and medical and dental students visit 22 villages and an orphanage during six trips each year. The healthcare angels dole out care to kids who’ve never seen doctors before, and parents grateful for a caregiver’s loving touch for their children.

“It’s hard to really truly understand how low on resources these people are,” says Barber about the Mayan Indians he serves. Displaced by a decades-long civil war and land-grab by outside interests, the indigenous Mayans retreated to some of Guatemala’s remotest areas to escape persecution and death. Referred to as “The Forgotten People” by the United Nations, the Mayans live on a less-than-modest sustenance level: no roads, no electricity. The women cook on stone hearths, and families eat what the men can grow or catch.

“Having food on the table each day is as good as it gets for these

people,” says Barber. “But they are some of the happiest individuals you’ll ever meet.”

That’s difficult to imagine given the health problems that routinely plague Mayan kids and adults alike: malnutrition, intestinal parasites, scabies, dengue fever, malaria, impetigo and even tuberculosis. But True North teams care for them all: hollow-cheeked kids with bellies distended from worms, children made sleepless from night-time scabies itching, women battling chronic bronchitis after hearth-cooking in closed huts day after day.

By the time Barber’s teams navigate their dugout canoes down remote Guatemalan rivers and hike ancient jungle paths on foot to set up a makeshift clinic for the day, the line of women and children waiting for them is long but patient. Many of the Mayans have been up most of the night, having begun their walk to the clinic at 2 or 3 a.m. Barber and his cohorts examine patients and dispense de-worming medication, vitamins, antibiotics, pain relievers, and skin creams as efficiently as they can. They test for malaria, HIV and hepatitis on the spot, and then arrange for medical transport via dugout canoe for the most serious cases.

While all of this sounds difficult, Barber insists to the contrary. “We don’t focus on what we can’t do, because there’s so much that we can do to help,” he says. Coworkers describe Barber as a man whose heart resides in Guatemala even when he’s not there in body. “I’m so

content and happy while I’m there helping,” he admits.

Both Barber and those who accompany him on the trips say that through their interactions with the Mayans they’ve rediscovered a joy—the joy of having a career in medicine. “Most of us got into healthcare because we liked serving others,” says Barber. “But somewhere along the line as you practice, a fog of busyness descends, and you can get sidetracked. On my first day serving in Central America, that fog lifted.”

Barber knows it sounds shopworn to call that first experience “life-changing,” but for Barber it simply was. Within weeks of his first trip in 2000, the 50-something Barber returned to the United States, started True North Missions, and began implementing a 4-year plan to phase out of his lucrative dental practice. He admits that patience isn’t his strong suit. “I like things done by yesterday,” Barber laughs. But his impatience, his passion, and his action-orientation has paid off, with thousands touched by the one-on-one care his organization delivers.

It’s that same love for interactional, “back to the basics medicine,” that keeps many True North volunteers returning to serve the 4,000-6,000 Guatemalans they treat annually. Deep in the jungle there is no medical red tape, insurance restrictions or entitlement mentalities—instead, just medicine practiced in its purest form.

Ed Jackson, a family medicine doctor from Michigan, explains. “In Guatemala, you can’t just order labs and X-rays and be done. Instead, you rely on your skills, intuition, and interaction with the patient to get their problems solved. It reminds me of why I got into medicine in the first place.”

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TRUE NORTH MISSIONS

Founder: Alan Barber, DDS
Mission: Provide healthcare for underserved children and their families in Central America.
Background: After returning from his first medical missions trip in 2000, the 53-year-old Barber sold a thriving dental practice to start TNM.
Annual Trips: 6 per year to 122 Guatemalan villages and an orphanage, where TNM volunteers set up mobile clinics daily.
Patients Served: Over 14,000 Guatemalan kids and adults
Diseases Treated: Intestinal parasites, scabies, impetigo, malaria, malnutrition, infection, bronchitis, dengue fever, HIV, hepatitis.
Future Goals: Build a centrally located “convergence” clinic, staffed year-round by a nurse.
Fundraiser: Golf Tournament, April 11 at The National Golf Club
Donate: truenorthmissions.com

“Why should we help? Because we can.”
 —Alan Barber, TNM Founder

James Wolfe, an emergency physician from Tulsa, Okla, also finds personal renewal. He loves the spirit of his Mayan patients. “To see the joy in just their day to day living—it’s the reason I’ll be going back,” he says.

Patients’ gratitude also energizes the volunteers. Many Mayan parents express thanks just for a nurse’s touch or a medical student’s confirmation that their child is okay. “These are parents who have the same hopes and dreams we do,” says Barber. “They’re hoping for a brighter future for their kids.”

So far Barber and just a handful of friends have bankrolled most of True North’s missions. Their money has funded six Guatemalan trips a year and an eyesight saving operation for a Guatemalan teacher. Because Barber is meticulous about caring for the



health and safety of his volunteers, he also purchased an enclosed boat to house True North volunteers during their weeklong treks.

Barber admits that marketing True North isn’t his forte, but the man his colleagues describe as “modest” also knows that outside money and publicity are needed to sustain his organization’s progress. People like local real estate agent Heidi Bacon, local marketer Jeff Erickson and the CBS reality show “Survivor: Nicaragua” competitor Yves Rojas have taken up True North’s cause. This April, True North will host its first official Kansas City fundraiser, a golf tournament at Tom Watson’s The Deuce golf course.

But first, Barber will once again board a plane bound for Guatemala. Again, he’ll be surrounded by medical students, nurses, physicians and dentists from across the country eager to dole out care. Again, he’ll see the smiling faces of his Guatemalan patients. And, if he’s lucky, little hands will tie on his wrist a bracelet that’s colorfully woven just for him, again. ❖

To find out more, sign up for the golf tournament, or donate, visit truenorthmissions.com.

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The Journey From Success To Significance by John Maxwell

