

# Four county residents join group on medical mission

By CHRIS BIRKS  
The Northwest Herald

LA PAZ, Honduras — In the back corner of a crowded, noisy pediatrics room, Louis Moncado waits patiently by his unconscious daughter's side.

During the day, he fans her with a newspaper, trying to make the 4-year-old's recovery from surgery a little easier. At night, he lays his head on the side of her bed, holding her hand in case she wakes up and wonders where he is.

Alba Moncado, Louis' daughter, has a club foot, which is a congenital disorder that turns the foot inward. Walking is difficult, and running is nearly impossible. Louis, a La Paz farmer, cannot afford the corrective surgery Alba needs since Hurricane Mitch destroyed his crops.

His only hope is a volunteer group from the United States, which included four McHenry County women.

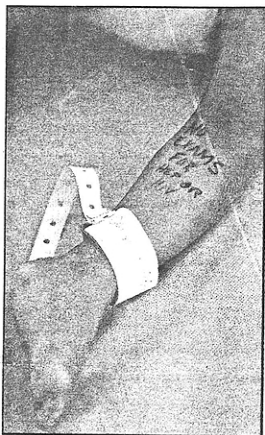
Finally, more than a day after the surgery, Louis holds his alert daughter in his arms, her freshly bandaged right foot rests across his knee. He collects his belongings from around the chair he has called home for the past 24 hours.

He is thankful for everything the Americans have done, but he may not be aware of how much the medical team truly cares.

As Louis kept vigil over Alba, Carolyn Sweeney of Woodstock kept watch over him, a friendly pair of eyes looking out for both patient and family.

"(I like to work the nightshift) because it's on a more personal basis," Sweeney said. "My goal is to just be in the culture of the people and see how they view us."

Sweeney, a nurse at Harvard Hospital, was one of the women who traveled to Honduras in March as part of the Surgical Medical Assistance Relief Teams volunteer agency. The SMART group sends



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The medical team writes the status of a child's test on her leg.

medical personnel and laypeople to Central America to help residents.

For Margaret Wolf, a nurse from Memorial Medical Center in Woodstock and Dawn Lentine, a cosmologist from Oakwood Hills, this was the first SMART trip they would take.

The March visit was Sweeney's second trip to Honduras and Helen Howard Edwards, a nurse at Northern Illinois Medical Center in McHenry, was back for the fifth time. More than 25 people from around the United States took part in the mission.

Despite their veteran status, this trip was unique for Sweeney and Howard Edwards.

They were in Honduras in early October 1998, just a few weeks before Hurricane Mitch cut a deadly path through the country, leaving nearly 6,000 dead.

This trip was their first chance to see what happened.

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## Honduras

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"It really hits you after you just get back from someplace like this," Sweeney said about seeing the destruction on television and in the newspapers of the United States. "Helen and I went through this period of mourning. I mean, we were just there."

The reasons people have for spending their free time helping others in a Third World country are as varied as each individual. One common thread is the idea they could make a difference. In Honduras, making a difference is not difficult.

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, with more than half the population living in poverty, according to statistics from the World Bank. The SMART team would have come to Honduras even if the hurricane had not hit — the need there always has existed. It is the rest of the world that now is seeing how much the country is hurting.

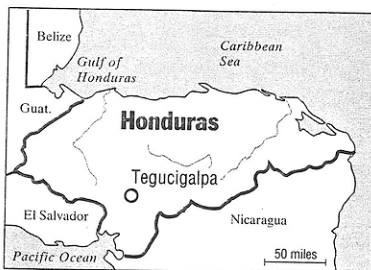
During this trip, the team worked in La Paz, a small town about 40 miles northwest of Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital. The only hospital is a primitive, yet workable, one-story structure. The team sets up shop first and starts by screening people who will receive medical attention later.

The pre-op area where Howard Edwards works is little more than a hallway. She scurries from patient to patient, preparing them for operations that will change their lives.

She helps ease the pressure the medical team members feel, occasionally zipping into the operating room to lend a hand or to tell a joke.

"We work hard and laugh our (butts) off," Howard Edwards said with a grin as she checked on a young girl.

Most of the team members have worked together on missions before, so the mood remains upbeat, despite the plight of the patients. Banter fills the poorly



lighted rooms, with many inside jokes and "Remember when you ..." stories followed by laughter.

The Americans use two operating areas: one for orthopedic work and another for cosmetic reconstruction staffed by a team from the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. Club feet, cleft palate and the like make up the 40 or so cases the team will work on during the weekend.

For most of the patients, the American medical team is the only hope they have of leading a normal life. They pay, not with money or gifts, but with the thanks of a person saved.

"I've been waiting my whole life for this operation," Rene Rodriguez said. He and his 4-year-old son, Rene Jr., had extra fingers and toes removed. Neither could walk correctly and Rene Sr. could not maintain a job.

He understands how their lives have been transformed by surgery.

"I used to cry when I was a boy and the other children would run and play," Rene Sr. said. "Now, my son can play with the other children and not cry. It was worth everything to bring my son (from Tegucigalpa). I want him to have the life I didn't have."

The immediate and lasting impact is what drew some SMART team members to Honduras.

"If we don't do it, no one will," said Brian Stee-

land, a team member from Michigan. "In the States, if we don't do it, someone else will."

Surgery is not the only aid the Americans have brought. The team also runs a general clinic where those with less serious ailments can receive treatment.

The line of people to see Dr. Mark Sadzikowski of Detroit snakes across an open courtyard. Hundreds of people wait in 90-degree heat for as long as five hours.

Wolf, the nurse from NIMC, assists in the diagnoses. Every few minutes, a new family steps into a small room. Translators tell the Americans what is wrong — worms, dry eyes and malnutrition all are common sights. Wolf and Sadzikowski discuss what they see and decide on prescriptions.

With the demand high, breaks are rare. People keep coming from early morning until after dark, and the hustle stops only when the doors close for the day.

Outside the clinic, Lentine sets up a makeshift beauty salon. While people wait to see the doctors, Lentine cuts their hair. So many of the children have lice that she must ration the special shampoo.

"I was questioning if I would be of any use because I didn't know what to expect," Lentine said, trimming the bangs of a small boy. "I love giving, so knowing that you're giving to people that really need it is beyond words."

That sentiment is echoed by all the volunteers. Here, they are able to do what they love, away from the daily stresses and politics at home. There is a level of need and appreciation they find nowhere else.

As the team prepares to finish its mission, a woman walks out of the hospital, supporting her daughter with one arm. The child had her foot repaired and is hurrying faster than the mother can keep up. Before they cross through the exit door, the mother turns to a nearby SMART member and utters the only English she knows.

"Thank you."