

**Brenda Sheets of St. Andrews Church Takes Annual Medical Missions Trip**

Brenda Sheets took her first mission trip to Honduras with St. Andrews Baptist Church 14 years ago. A team from the church had been participating in medical missions in the Central American country through a faith-based organization out of Mississippi for about 10 years, and the newly retired teacher felt led to join them. She recalls the blessings and challenges of that first trip as she helped get a new clothing ministry off the ground.

“I learned a lot that first trip. Another church collected the clothes, put them in plastic bags with sizes written on a slip of paper and then boxed them up. To get it organized better I devised a method to put the clothes in zippered bags, labeled and packed by gender. We did that for several years, and it has evolved into an efficient operation now,” Brenda says, adding that she hasn’t missed a trip since.

The Tennessee native and her husband Tom raised two children in the Columbia area, and now have six grandchildren. In the past, Brenda has used her teaching and organizational skills to start an after-school ministry in her home church and now serves as the leader of the Visionary Leadership Community of the Columbia Metro Baptist Association.

Her experiences in Honduras have sparked a passion for missions that carries throughout the year. The January trips are carefully planned months in advance and, she admits, her Honduras suitcase stays half-packed just to make it easier. Brenda also helps other St. Andrews Baptist members understand how they can participate in missions by giving, going or collecting. The church “warehouses” supply items, Sunday School classes provide hygiene kits and school supplies, church members sort and package clothes and see that the team’s supplies and prepackaged foods are driven to New Orleans to be loaded onto a banana boat in October so that it all arrives in Honduras by January.

“If your part in missions is writing a check, it is a vital part because it allows those of us who go on mission to do what we do. But if you ever get the opportunity to go, you need to go. Most people must take vacation days, so I say it’s the hardest week of ‘vacation’ but it’s the most rewarding,” Brenda says.

Missionaries based in Honduras choose the different villages the medical mission teams serve each year. After arriving in the capital city of Tegucigalpa, the team stays overnight before setting out for the remote village sites. They load buses with supplies, equipment and native workers who can help translate and navigate to the village where they will spend the next four days of the trip.

January is summertime in Honduras, which means the village’s school building – if they have one - is empty and can provide sleeping quarters for the team. Still, the accommodations are quite basic and often without electricity.

“The school room walls are typically three to four feet high then chicken wire or iron bars go from there up to the roof, so it’s very open. We’ve learned over the years to use empty supply boxes to cover the window openings to help block the cold and howling winds. The temperature can get down into the 30’s at night, and this year our village was at an altitude of 6,000 feet,” she explains.

Once in the villages, workers set up the clinics and a tent used for worship services while the ministers and evangelists that travel with the team begin to talk with villagers and distribute food or other basic

items. The clinics operate the same way in each location – the people must attend worship services to

obtain the registration card that is required to receive clinic services. News about the clinics travels fast, and Brenda estimates that they see several hundred people on each mission trip. Some people walk for days from other villages to receive medical assistance through the clinics.

The team also offers optical, dental and pharmacy services, and team members serve on the construction crew, in children’s ministry and clothing distribution. Brenda says a few years ago the team noticed that the men in one village would not come near the worship services, instead they stood far away with their animals. The team now offers veterinarian services to reach more men in the villages, and many of them have prayed to accept Christ as a result.

Brenda oversees the optical clinic which administers eye exams and provides prescription glasses, some of which are made onsite. The team rents optical equipment for the week and brings sunglasses and readers, which is what most of the patients need. In addition to being equipped to use the optical equipment, Brenda has also been trained to spot cataracts and other eye diseases and says the team can connect patients with ophthalmologists from other medical teams. She has experienced first-hand how the optical ministry can change lives.

“One older man that couldn’t see from a distance put on a pair of glasses and his face lit up as he said, ‘I can see the birds singing in the trees in the next village!’ Then there was a 10-year-old girl whose vision was worse than what we label as legally blind. We were able to make her a pair of glasses and her mother cried as the girl walked out that day seeing things she’d never seen before. That’s when I thought ok, this is why I’m here,” Brenda says.

The team recognizes that their faith is being lived out for all to see during the mission trips. The translators and other Honduran natives employed for the work in the villages are not required to be Christians, and there is time for gospel conversations to occur.

“We get the opportunity to witness to villagers and translators. We’ve had several translators who have accepted Christ as a result of going out with our groups. We develop relationships with them as we have the opportunity to talk about life in our country and how life is for them in their country,” Brenda says.

As an added blessing, Brenda says her extended family has become involved in the Honduras ministry. She reports that the January 2019 trip was the first time in six years that she and Tom went without another family member joining them. When asked how missions first took root in her life, Brenda points to her parents as having instilled in her a love for others.

“My parents never went on a foreign mission trip, but practiced missions at home. If someone was in need, they helped them out. They modeled the truth that because God blessed you, you should pass that along,” she says.