



Travelogue

Part five: 'Hogar de Ninos' in Guatemala
Next week: Myanmar

'Living vicariously through the adventures of our friends'

'Out of the 14 million people in Guatemala, over 500,000 are orphans.

In our American mindset, an orphan is a child without both parents. But in Central America, an orphan can be any child who has no one to care for them, feed them, love them or protect them.'

In C. America, Muellers bring support, and witness the ample 'love, hope and joy' in faces of children

By JEFF MUELLER
For the News

As we touched down on the wet runway on that early spring day of 2014, I was reminded once again why my wife Lynda and I just landed in Guatemala City, the largest city in all of Central America.

After a year of planning and praying with a team from Immanuel Lutheran, it was clear that God wanted our church to learn all about the plight of Central American orphans and how other American Christian churches were meeting the vast need of these precious children.

As we taxied to the gate, I recalled the two Bible verses that had been the catalyst for this trip and many more trips to come: "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans... in their distress" (James 1:27). And Jesus' words: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). Immanuel Lutheran Church had received a clear mission from our Lord to fulfill these two verses and although almost none of us speak Spanish and have very little experience south of the border, when God says go, you go!

As we walked out of customs, we heard our names and turned to see our dear friend, Uncle Willy, waving at us to follow him around the fence and over to his parked car. Uncle Willy has been living in Guatemala City for over 30 years and is a retired businessman. He was going to serve as our tour guide, interpreter, and host for our 7-day adventure in beautiful Guatemala.

As he drove us confidentially through the crazy (and often scary) maze of cars, buses and motorcycles towards his fifth floor condo in the heart of the city, I recalled that out of the 14 million people living in Guatemala, it was estimated that over 500,000 were orphans.

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any child who has no one to care for them, feed them, love them or protect them.

Most children living in Christian orphanages in Guatemala have at least one living parent, usually their mother, but for various tragic reasons, the child is abandoned, abused or neglected to the point that they become "orphaned."

Guatemala is famous for its coffee and bananas. It is equally famous for once having the largest Mayan civilization in all of the Americas, with huge temples and ancient cities buried deep in the mountainous jungles. Guatemala also has a rich, cultural history of Spanish Colonial times, with beautiful cities like Antigua dating back to the 1500s.

But sadly, it is also well known for its more recent violent history of civil wars, political corruption, and drug cartels. Because of these deeply rooted chronic societal illnesses, babies are born with many strikes against them. This is why we were here. Most of our days in Guatemala were spent visiting three very special and vastly different Christian orphanages, or as they prefer to call them, "Hogar de Ninos" (children's homes).

One children's home was in the slums of the inner city run by Mama Carmen, an elderly Guatemalan woman I called "The Mother Theresa of Guatemala." She



housed 60 children fulltime, and watched 36 others after school, in a two floor building the size of most of our Hood River homes, with a one-car garage as their only play area.

Another orphanage was in a fairly safe area on the outskirts with 20 children, all under the age of five. They enjoyed a nice outdoor yard. The third home was in a high-security neighborhood that also hosted the Israeli Embassy. There were 26 children living in two large side-by-side houses that provided every possible need for each child, including a playground that rivals anything we have here in town.

We were struck by the fact that there were so many dif-

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Photos by Jeff and Lynda Mueller

"I walked in the doors of the first orphanage we visited and two small boys ran up and hugged me before I could say a single word," Jeff Mueller writes. He adds: "My wife, Lynda, wanted to take every one of those precious children home with her — every single one of them. I had to check her luggage before we left the country to make sure there were no stowaways." Guatemala, and the city of Antigua, is truly a stunningly beautiful part of the world, with active volcanoes, a mild tropical climate called "the eternal spring," and vast jungles, rivers, lakes and mountains.



About the author

Jeff and Lynda Mueller were high school sweethearts at Hood River Valley High, now married 36 years and counting. Jeff is the senior pastor at Immanuel Lutheran Church on 9th and State Street, and the chaplain of the Hood River Fire Department. Lynda is the church secretary and children's ministry director. Before returning to Hood River, they served churches in Northern California and Hawaii.

