



Pendleton nurse Julie Peck Renton is studying for her doctorate degree as a nurse practitioner through Duke University and recently spent 10 days in Honduras on a medical mission as part of her studies.



Two shacks near Las Mercedes are typical of homes in the Honduran mountain village.



Agustina Dominguez poses with her five children in her home in the Honduran village of Las Mercedes.

Ten days in Honduras

Medical team brings health care to remote mountain villages

By KATHY ANEY
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Few people get the opportunity to plunge themselves deep into the middle of another culture, an experience that can shift paradigms and trigger a swell of gratitude for one's own blessings.

Julie Peck Rendon, who traveled recently to South America with a medical team, had just this kind of eye-opening encounter in Honduras.

The Pendleton woman — St. Anthony Hospital nurse and nurse practitioner student at Duke University — is finishing her doctorate degree. The single mom travels to Durham, North Carolina, for one week a month and attends classes online. The 10 days spent in remote Honduran villages this spring topped off a semester of learning to practice medicine in third world countries.

Rendon and her 17 team members each hauled a backpack and two duffel bags packed with medications, hygiene supplies, eyeglasses and surgical masks. Much of the contents in Rendon's duffel had been donated by St. Anthony.

Upon arrival in the city of Tegucigalpa, the team looked around in both awe and dismay. The rugged mountain country offered gorgeous scenery, but the poverty took Rendon's breath away. Dilapidated shacks lined the hillsides, intermixed with wealthier abodes, and garbage lay everywhere.

"There's no garbage service," Rendon said. "The ground was completely covered."

Before heading out to remote



Dr. Penny Cooper, of Duke, teaches proper brushing to Maria Gumercinda Sanchez Dominguez and her children Javier and Ricci during her medical team's visit to the Honduran village of Las Mercedes.

Honduran villages, the team toured a hospital in La Esperanza, Intubaca. The hospital seemed from another century, lacking computers and

American hygiene practices such as wearing gloves.

"It was overcrowded. Lines of people snaked up and down the hallways in each wing," Rendon said. "Security was everywhere. The building was surrounded by men with guns."

The team next traveled about 10 hours by bus to the mountain village of Las Mercedes, where they arrived at a tiny brick clinic

co-founded by Duke professor/physician Dennis Clements. Forty-three families live in the village, most in one-room shacks with dirt floors and without indoor plumbing, electricity or bathrooms. Water is scarce and usually dirty, Rendon said. Dehydration is commonplace. Toilets

consist of holes in the ground, surrounded by privacy curtains.

Word spread quickly about the team's arrival.

"We saw at least 100 people a day," Rendon said. "By 7 a.m., the lobby was filled with people and others lined up outside."

People traveled from outlying villages, including one blind, 82-year-old man with a walking stick who hiked for hours on rough terrain to reach the clinic. Young women arrived carrying babies and toddlers on their backs and hips.

Common complaints included dental problems, headaches, skin conditions, infections and gastrointestinal issues. Parasites and lice plagued most of the patients.

"Many of these patients don't have access to health care for a full year," said Dr. Rosa Solorzano, who led the Duke team.

Rendon practiced her Spanish to communicate with patients, but had access to a tutor from Heifer International when she got stuck.

The team of two physicians, two nurse practitioners and 14 students spent four days working from two rooms with a couple of examination areas in each one.

Each family received bags



Duke medical student Heather Burrell conducts a postpartum visit with a mother and baby in Las Mercedes.

filled with toothbrush, toothpaste, shampoo and conditioner, vitamins, parasite medication and body lotion.

During the rest of the year, a nurse staffs the clinic. In Honduras, Rendon said, nurses spend their first year serving their country. In Las Mercedes, a nurse named Mario focuses much of his efforts on child development and birth control, going from home to home and educating about birth control methods such as the IUD.

"We saw girls 13 and 14 years old with babies," Rendon said. "We'd see girls of 19 who already had four children."

Though the team took precautions to drink bottled water they had gotten from Heifer International, most every day at least one person suffered gastrointestinal symptoms. They slept side-by-side in sleeping bags on the clinic floor. Scorpions and snakes occasionally startled the team members.

Despite their health challenges, Rendon said she marveled at villagers' resilience, positive outlook and appreciation.

"We were constantly blessed by the people," Rendon said. "They were so grateful for every little thing we did for them."

Solorzano said Rendon's energy and attitude impressed her.

"She was always amazed and learning something new," Solorzano said. "She was very engaged."

The team spent several days in another village of 200 people called Chorti. Most of the residents, Rendon said, are direct Mayan descendants. The poverty and health problems mirrored those in Las Mercedes.

Looking back on her time in Honduras, Rendon reflected about how she will carry the experience with her.

"It has taught me a lot about different cultures and the need to understand that we never know where someone has come from and the struggles they have had," she said. "I understand why I must make sure to treat every single patient with respect and dignity."

After Rendon passes licensure tests, she will start a new job at Trios Health in Kennewick as a nurse practitioner responsible for admitting patients from the ER into the hospital. She will continue to pursue her doctorate at Duke.

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Dozens of men, women and children wait their turn for appointments with members of a medical team from Duke University at a tiny clinic in the mountains of Honduras.