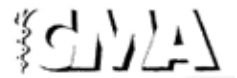




North Coast Physician



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Cover Photo

"BIRD ON A LOG"

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Helping Others, Healing Oneself

Jennifer Heidmann, M.D.



This article is a little different from my usual. I wanted to share my own recent experience with volunteering. My 16 year old daughter and I joined a team of healthcare providers in February in Guatemala. Our assignment was to fit paralyzed children, and some adults too, into wheelchairs.

These people are living with various diseases that affect their ability to walk. Many of the children have cerebral palsy, others have spina bifida, and still others with muscular dystrophy. Others were amputees or had other birth defects. All of them have been carried around by family and friends their whole life, making getting out of the home difficult.

They came to us after months or years of waiting for a wheelchair. The chairs themselves are assembled in a factory outside Antigua called Hope Haven. There are about 27 people working at the factory, and most of them are in wheelchairs themselves. They do not advertise, but by word of mouth they have a waiting list of 3000 wheelchair requests. They serve Guatemala and other places in Central and South America. They also serve other places in the world, for instance they recently sent 250 chairs to Vietnam. Teams like ours then travel to help fit people to their chairs. *(picture below: Jianhong Heidmann, age 16 and Danny, a Guatemalan child)*



Hope Haven West, in Modesto, CA, works with the Guatemala factory, led by retired Orthopedic Surgeon Joseph Serra, who accompanied us on this Guatemalan trip (his 8th time). Hope Haven is 100% nonprofit, with volunteers who work with discarded chairs and refurbish them. In the past it was a big challenge to try to find appropriate chairs for children. In Guatemala, the families can come back for repairs and also replacement chairs as the children grow. The old chairs are then refurbished for reuse.

(picture below Jianhong Heidmann, age 16 and local Guatemalan volunteer working together).



Overall, we served about 30 people during our week in Guatemala. It may seem like a drop in the bucket, but it was so wonderful to connect with the children and their families, and to see the immediate difference the chairs made in their life. Also, this work left us feeling inspired, humbled and content. Volunteering like this offers a shift in perspective, and a chance to slow down and focus on something outside of your own experience.

You do not have to travel to volunteer, as there are many opportunities right here in our community. Benefits include service to others, promotion of a healthier community, and better health for yourself. Research shows that volunteerism may decrease mortality rates, lessen depression and keeps people mentally and physically fit for longer. These benefits especially come into affect for volunteers age 40 and over.

If you are interested in supporting the Hope Haven wheelchair project, see their website: <http://www.hopehavenwest.com/>. They change lives: the kids, their families, and those of us who volunteer. **§**



SOMETHING ON YOUR MIND? WANT TO SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES? PLEASE SEND THOSE THOUGHTS FOR PUBLICATION IN THE NORTH COAST PHYSICIAN OR IF YOU'RE INSECURE ABOUT YOUR ABILITY TO WRITE - LET US HELP YOU.

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