

Some people think of community as their neighborhood or city. Others span the word to their country or even the whole world. This March, a prayer was answered and I embarked on an eight day medical Mission Trip to Guatemala through the Mission of Love to help serve their community. After raising money by selling cookies around my school, I packed up and flew to the heart of the Americas. Doctors, nurses and other volunteers worked together performing cleft palates surgeries, free of cost. The first day I felt useless compared to the life-changing surgeons, but little did I know that the next day, everything would change.



The next morning, the non-medical volunteers went to another location that required painting and light construction. We arrived at "Casa de Dios," a small house that served as a temporary home for families with sick children who could not afford hotels while receiving treatment. Walking into the non-profit charity home, the sky-blue painted walls served as a cheerful backdrop to the bright-eyed children: some bald, some sleeping, and one without a leg. A nervous rush overcame me; I was unsure if the children would like me or understand my Spanish. I had taken four years of Spanish, but I doubted my ability to communicate. I smiled and waved to a small girl quietly sitting alone, wearing traditional Mayan clothing. She grinned, despite her cleft palate. I sat down in the empty chair next to her and gently greeted "hola." Soon we were making progress speaking Spanish. Her brother had joined us, along with other curious kids. Soon we were sprawled out on the floor, coloring, talking, and laughing at my attempts to pronounce new Spanish words.



The next day we painted the sticky, hand-printed walls. The kids, happy to see the Americans had returned, watched in awe as we painted. I snuck back into the kitchen to ask if they had any extra paintbrushes. When I walked back into the room gesturing that they could help too, they eagerly rushed over and grabbed the brushes. Before I knew it, I was brushless! The kids were overjoyed to be part of the excitement, painting in every-which-way. When a child had to leave for their appointment, they reluctantly put the paintbrush down and walked out of the home, gripping their mother's hand. Eventually they would return weak and tired, but smiling.



Before leaving on the last day, everyone from the home sang us a song in Spanish. As I looked at the children's smiling faces I was overcome with emotion and love. The cook hugged me and whispered, "it is okay. They have changed your life and you have changed ours." I realized what she said was true: a small change in someone's life was made by taking a chance, experimenting with my Spanish, and offering a paintbrush.

Throughout the week, we travelled to different parts of Guatemala to help other people in need. I learned so much by watching Kathy work her magic and achieving the impossible through her gentle words and open heart. When I returned home, my mind was always preoccupied with the thought of the children living in such a poverty-stricken and suffering world, yet their attitudes and hearts were above anyone I had ever met. In my everyday life I think of the children and how they were always smiling and laughing. Imagine if everyone was as joyful and pure as these children; how different the world would be. There is no cost; no labor involved. All we need to do is smile to a neighbor or offer a helping hand. The kids from Guatemala were able, even if they had no shoes. Kathy and Bob Price were able; always with an inspiring attitude that changed the world one smile at a time. In my own small way I think that I am able, and I believe that you can do it too.

" YOU are not here to save the world but are here to touch the hands and hearts that are within your reach."



**Erin Ward,**  
Mission of Love Volunteer