



ACTS Newsletter

Americans Caring Teaching Sharing



www.ActsHonduras.org

Fall 2020

Every year we report to our friends and supporters how ACTS Honduras has leveraged your generous funding for community development in rural Honduras. Unfortunately, 2020 is unlike any other year and as we know, when something bad happens, poor people get the worst of it.

When you were wondering how to find masks and toilet paper and disinfectant, you were probably also wondering how our dear friends in Honduras were faring. Could they keep safe from the pandemic covering the globe? Would their fragile economy adapt, and could they survive another drought and poor growing season? The challenges are extreme, and our support has been the difference between having nothing and having hope. Please help us help others with a generous donation. Thank you.

Linda Kennedy

ACTS Honduras, President

Stringing barbed wire across the road through El Rosario created the lockdown in March.

AGRICULTURE

COVID-19

We begin with good news. The people in El Rosario have worked hard at staying safe and so far, there has not been any COVID in the community. They have determination to prepare for “when,” not “if” the virus infects their community members. With lots of coaching from ACTS on social distancing, correct use of PPE, preparing for quarantine, sanitation, and the unknown timetable for vaccination, the leaders are better prepared to take effective action.

Honduras is fully involved in the pandemic and 150 precious healthcare workers have died. Our Honduran collaborator Dr. Suyapa Bejarano said “Social distancing and masks are our only tools against COVID.”

El Rosario is locked down with gates staffed by older teens. Women sew masks for everyone on machines and with materials provided by ACTS. Schools are closed, including English and computer classes at the Education Center, and the library is also closed. The government banned bus transportation and only clinicians and food delivery can move freely. Rosarians rely on beans and corn grown onsite with limited delivery of basic foodstuffs. Nelson Mejia, president of the Clinic said, “No one has any money.”

If quarantine is needed, the bunkhouse where we stay (owned

by the Clinic) will be used. Jinny Brack and Sue Burgos adapted a quarantine protocol from India and taught it to leaders via Zoom. We funded a generous supply of PPE, disinfectant, and gear to safely quarantine anyone who needs it. Individuals with symptoms will be cared for at a regional COVID clinic. The closest hospital is in Yoro, 90 minutes away. Per their Director’s priority, ACTS sent high-flow oxygen masks; ventilators are not available.

Making Plans For A Better Agricultural Future

Simple “solutions” are not capable of mitigating the effects of our serious climate situation making weather drier and prone to extremes in Central America and elsewhere. Bryce Wilson, Brad Taylor, Dan Saulnier and key technical lead Dr. Gustavo Merten of the Swensen College of Science and Engineering at the University of Minnesota Duluth traveled to El Rosario in early 2020 for an Agricultural Assessment of farming practices and resources. Dr. Merten’s background is agricultural engineering, soil science, and rural agriculture projects in South America.

The goal is to develop a program to help El Rosario manage climate change that can then be generalized to Locomapa and beyond. At an open meeting, the team shared their purpose, answered questions and concerns, and solicited ideas. They



Dr. Gustavo Merten learning about current agriculture practices in the village.

inspected crops and pastures, potential sources of irrigation, animal husbandry, took soil samples and visited the Honduran Foundation for Agricultural Research.

In the short term, we need a plan for the soil to recover, while still feeding people and animals. Long term, the plan must provide for food, income, and animal grazing, supporting each other and the land, without perpetual financial or technical inputs from ACTS. We think this is possible with several distinct

but coordinated interventions developed with the community and requiring engagement by the residents.

Farming Right Now

Fear of the pandemic gripped communities everywhere by March. We learned to stay home and shelter in place. By doing that, the “right thing,” farming families in El Rosario missed the window to plant their March crop of beans. Ordinarily, that first crop jumpstarts the planting cycle for the year providing food and a cash crop to fund the June corn and October bean crops. Missing that planting started a financial cascade that grew in the context of the pandemic lockdown. Compounding the problem, many families rely on relatives, often young adults, finding work in the city of San Pedro Sula and providing wages to improve the family income. By mid-March, many of these young adults were “stuck” in the city with no job and no way to get home. El Rosario was locked down, even preventing the return of immediate family for fear of them carrying the virus.

With great trepidation the farmers prepared their fields in June and planted the corn with hopes for rain. Good news came

by Zoom, the rains were adequate, and the corn grew. Finally, something positive!

Fast forward to September, and there were no resources for the critical October bean planting. Without the March crop to use as seeds and some to sell to buy agricultural chemicals, the farmers had no seeds and no money. We were prepared to help, but not sure of the scope of the problem. Dionisio surveyed the families by going house to house and found 103 families with no seeds and facing starvation. We collaborated on a program that would be operationalized by the farmers’ local microbank (also without any money) to provide each family with a loan of 50# of bean seeds at no interest, which was calculated by the Hondurans to be sufficient to grow the beans needed to feed the family. We added the option of another 50-100# at very low interest for any family that wanted to plant more to try to “get ahead.” About two-thirds took the option of extra beans. This extra-large planting required more labor so men from other villages worked as day laborers to get the crop in, providing much needed cash for their families. If it rains enough, those beans will be harvested in December. **The cost to ACTS was \$12,000 to save 103 families.**



Farmers wearing masks poke holes in the rocky soil to plant bean seeds in October.

The indigenous villages of Los Oreros and Los Planes, each home to a few dozen families of charcoal makers, ran out of food with no prospects to replenish. Lacking transportation for their charcoal to get to market, their only source of income was eliminated. Our Honduran collaborator Sarahi Reyes MD is allowed to travel and with cash contributions from Honduran medical students augmented by ACTS, she buys and delivers basic foods to keep the families afloat.

HEALTH

Peter Mason’s tradition is to lead a medical trip to El Rosario each year over his birthday week in February, which put a team onsite just before the pandemic. Bob Keene and the ACTS dental team worked for three days with Dr. Reina Lara in schools providing fluoride varnish, special fillings to stop the bacteria that causes cavities, and oral hygiene instruction. They saw 174 students in six schools and spilled over to church porches. This first-hand view revealed the burden and challenges of transporting materials and dental services to the more remote regions. Some villages are not served by passable roads. When electricity was available, Dr. Reina and the team used the dental clinic. Now, pandemic rules prevent any further dental care to this region.



Dr. Reina treats a brave patient in the classroom of his elementary school.

Dr. Reina will return as soon as it is safe to do so. Bob said, “Being there and providing dentistry alongside Dr. Reina informs our understanding of the barriers to dental outreach in this environment and is incredibly inspirational. The need is endless and our continued contribution to dental health is essential.”

Another critical need is maternal and child health, particularly education for young mothers-to-be. The Krasnoff Foundation funded our Taking Care of Moms “TCOM” educational program for first-time mothers. TCOM provides key information about how to take care of themselves so that they can take care of their kids. Without information, vitamins, sleep, and proper nutrition, young mothers do not thrive,

and their babies will suffer too. Fifteen newly pregnant women were invited to join and 90% attended all seven sessions.

Building on the unique and successful “multi-organ” cancer screening outreach construct developed by the Norris Cotton Cancer Center for brigade-style cancer screening, the Medical Committee adapted their all-in-one system from cancer to health screening for kids. This is known as a “jornada,” which means day-of-work. In December, a team including newcomers Dr. Ann Bracken and Dr. Barb Homeier screened 90 kids from 0 months-6 years for developmental milestones, vision and hearing, nutritional assessments, and physical exams. All got vitamins and preventative antiparasitic treatments.

Highlights included reaching out to remote communities and La Fuerza para el Futuro’s competent assistance managing many moms and kids. We found six kids needing classroom accommodations for low vision, several to be followed up for hearing, and children with chronic medical issues requiring more intensive management, including hydrocephalus, seizure disorder, and a rare case of osteogenesis imperfecta. Nurse Nolvía will continue to follow these children at the clinic. Each child at the jornada went home with a new age-appropriate book, a toothbrush, and a healthy snack.



A proud grandmother holds her darling grandchild at a TCOM training. Each child received a hat knitted by the ACTS TCOM team.

Normally, the Clinic relies on municipal water for its activities, but more and more frequently, water is limited to a few hours per day. ACTS has provided funding for a large holding tank and plumbing to the exam room to ensure availability of water even when the municipal supply is cut off.

EDUCATION

In El Rosario, the school year typically begins in February and goes through November, but this year by order of the Honduran government, the schools are closed to keep kids and staff safe. Families are staying close to home and kids miss the daily challenge of school and learning. The Rosario Education

Committee is using this time for improvements at the Education Center including a back-up water storage system and a new roof on the bodega. We are discussing new options for supplemental classes that could include how to run a small business or other practical topics.

QUICK UPDATES

Dean Seibert’s project to facilitate home gardens managed by women continues with success demonstrated by fat cabbages and rows of carrots and other healthy vegetables. In 2008, Peter Mason was having a quiet morning in the El Rosario Clinic when a mother from 15 miles away arrived with a tiny infant with multiple congenital deformities. Over the years, we have aided little Gloria and her mother through several challenging orthopedic surgeries, supplemental feeding and schooling, and other support.



Peter visiting Gloria, now age 12, who proudly shows off her schoolwork.



La Fuerza para el Futuro gang poses with their certificates and t-shirts on Graduation Day.

Jules Ortego led a team of Dartmouth students for another exciting year of leadership development for La Fuerza para el Futuro. This year’s leadership themes were nutrition and exercise, and education about sexual violence. In the afternoons, the group of 50 was divided into crews that measured, cut, constructed, and painted all new tables for the Education Center.

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Jinny Brack, pediatrics and primary care, Hanover NH
Suzanne Burgos, primary care, Bethel VT
Michael Harris, educational administration, Etna NH
Tim Keane, operations, Thetford VT
Robert Keene, global health, dentistry, Hanover NH
Linda Kennedy, agriculture, infrastructure, cancer prevention, Thetford Center VT
Ethan LaRochelle, education, technology, Hanover NH
Betsy Rybeck Lynd, agriculture, education, Plainfield NH
Peter Mason, primary care, public health, Lebanon NH
Theresa Mundy, education, Lyme NH
Juliana Ortego, teen leadership, NYC NY
Jennifer Randolph, organizational data, Hanover NH
John Sanders, medicine, Lyme NH
Dan Saulnier, infrastructure, agriculture, water systems, Springfield NH
Hart Silverwood, treasurer, Lee NH
Brad Taylor, agriculture, Ithaca NY
Helen Whyte, community organizer, Lyme NH
Bryce Wilson, agriculture and water systems, Cupertino CA
Dean Seibert, active emeritus, Norwich VT

BACKGROUND & FACTS

Honduras is the second-poorest country in the hemisphere, after Haiti, and home to just under nine million people. The population is young; the government is unstable; and unemployment is pervasive. ACTS Honduras, a small nonprofit organization based in Vermont, has been connected for more than 30 years to the community of El Rosario (pop. 550) and Locomapa, a poor rural farming region by providing advice to local leaders, vision, and the wherewithal to improve public health, education, agriculture, and medical services. For ACTS, "community development" means helping local people to make their own communities stronger. We have no employees and no property here or in Honduras. ACTS members pay their own way to Honduras.

SHARING OUR SUCCESS WITH OTHER PARTNERS

Over the years, we have been proud to partner with and assist excellent organizations from Honduras to New England to help rural Hondurans improve their own lives.

Engineers Without Borders Northeastern University, Undergraduate and Alumni Chapters – water systems

The Dorothy and Jack Byrne Foundation – funds *La Fuerza para el Futuro*

Liga Contra Cancer from Honduras – cancer screening, treatment, research, and their PESCA program

Dartmouth's Norris Cotton Cancer Center – cancer screening and research

Dartmouth-Hitchcock Pathology – research partnership to prevent cancer

Keene State University – dietetic interns

Hanover NH Rotary Club – funding latrine building

Krasnoff Foundation – funding for Taking Care of Moms

Honduran Foundation for Investigation of Agriculture (FHIA) – agricultural extension agency

Zondervan Foundation – library support and promotion of reading at home, vision screening

NH Charitable Trust – facility to reduce agricultural chemical exposure

Coverys Community Foundation – education and management to reduce agricultural chemical exposure

Partners of the Americas – funding for travel to USA to attend Rassias course

The Rassias Foundation – immersion programs in teaching English

Lyme NH Congregational Church's Bargain Barn, and United Church of Dorset VT and East Rupert's Rummage Sales, The Woodlands Lebanon NH – donated clothing

US Airforce VT – transport of donated goods to Honduras

Lyme NH Talent Show – donation of proceeds

Universidad de Católica San Pedro Sula – academic partner, medical students, institutional review board

The fire departments of Hanover and Springfield NH, Thetford and Windsor VT – firefighting equipment