

In the past few months, while the cornstalks dried and disappeared, while the trucks kicked up dust on their way to the quarry or the garbage dump, we here at Primeros Pasos were taking many crucial steps forward, solidifying our presence here in the valley and increasing the quality of our services. Working with a strong team of international and Guatemalan volunteers, we created a number of short and long term goals, related to both our health care and health education programs. To fulfill these goals we have mobilized, uniting internal change (including a name change!) with more extensive publicity, fomenting new contacts and interest within the communities and with various other local and governmental organizations.

Since January, over 2000 kids from four schools have passed through our clinics' doors, receiving attentive and comprehensive medical and dental care. As always, we are loyal to the value of education in the development of health consciousness, and we continue giving daily classes (now with a revamped curriculum to better fit the children's needs) within the clinic, after the kids have seen the doctor and dentist for their individual problems.

This being their second year participating in our program, the children, their parents, and the school administrators greet us with a warm handshake or a pat on the shoulder when we see them, either in the clinic or in their own schools and communities. They are anxious to visit us in order to find answers to their questions and concerns. At Primeros Pasos, we know this means that their faith in us has grown; we have worked every day, questioning ourselves and striving to learn more about the people we serve, in order to earn their delicate trust, which comes with time, honesty, quality of service, and devotion to their cause.

One of the crucial changes that has helped win their confidence was the arrival of our new physician, Dr. Ivan de Paz, who joined the project in April. With his sensitive and patient manner, he has already contributed to the positive changes we have been working toward this year. A recent graduate of Xela's Universidad San Carlos, he is familiar to the region, its livelihood and its afflictions, and in the short time he's been with us has attracted a greater number of women, men and children who seek out his medical advice at the clinic.

We are also excited to announce the initiation of expanded and affordable lab services at the clinic site in Tierra Colorada. With the combined effort of the staff at el Laboratorio La Fé and our volunteer lab technician, Amy Kost, we are now providing more extensive blood work and urine samples in addition to the stool analyses that we have always offered.

On the education side, we have expanded our program so that we may more directly address the causes of poor hygiene and development that lie at the root of most health problems we treat at the clinic. Throughout January and February we initiated short investigations in each of the communities, interviewing school directors, government representatives, and community leaders in order to compose a simple database of their needs as well as the resources, committees, and PTAs available to them. In the process, our educators had the opportunity to meet community members, asking them for their input while publicizing clinic hours and services: in general, giving a face to Primeros Pasos, the presence of an understanding smile in their communities.

In March, we collaborated with SOSEP to hold a series of nutrition and hygiene workshops with the parents (mainly mothers) of children in the government daycare system within the valley. Through discussion and hands-on activities, we talked about the causes and dangers of the most common illnesses, simple home remedies to alleviate their symptoms, as well as the importance of healthy habits in disease prevention. We are grateful to have more intimate contact with the families of the kids we treat through the clinic, knowing that only through their cooperation and understanding can we reduce the region's epidemics.

As part of the outreach education program, our health educators have formulated new curriculums that are sensitive to the populations' needs and worldview, elaborating on pertinent themes in fun ways. Beginning in May, we gave nine classes in two schools, Xepache and Candelaria, covering such topics as puberty and sexuality, drug and alcohol prevention, environmental awareness, and nutrition and hygiene. During class, we get the kids to talk openly about their bodies and ask questions about the changes and challenges

confronting them and their families; in other instances, they play, share, draw, and laugh. The measurement of our success is reflected both in ourselves and the kids; each new class is as much a learning experience for us, the teachers, as it is for the students. In the upcoming months, we will continue our education efforts in the remaining schools, as always evaluating ourselves and the progress of our kids.

We are nearing the end of May, eager for the relief from the dust clouds and a new season of rewarding work. With the first rains, the countryside has transformed, responding to the daily showers with powerful patches of green. It is during these climatic revolutions that we can most clearly observe the resilience of the local people and their land, now populated with the assuring signs of sustenance and harvest. At Primeros Pasos, we are following their lead, looking forward to another cycle of tilling and advancement in the struggle to give at least as much as we receive.