Roosters, Refractors and Eskimo Ice Cream

An RBC Student on the Nicaragua Eye Team

By Kristen Graber

(Editor’s note: Levi Miller has helped organize a medical missions eye team to Nicaragua for the last three years. Because the trip happens during RBC’s winter term in January, it’s been difficult to enlist the help of full-time Rosedale students. Kristen Graber decided to give it a try. Here’s her report.)

It was Monday, December 9, at about 8:15 in the morning. I was sitting in Genesis class preparing to hear a debate when my professor, Phil Weber, told me to stop by his office sometime that day and discuss “Levi Miller and Nicaragua.” Five and a half weeks later, I was on a plane headed for Nicaragua to participate in a two-week trip through Medical Missions International. This trip would focus on eye care, giving out eyeglasses and performing needed surgeries. The opportunity to participate in this trip was a complete surprise, and at first I did not even think that it would be possible. The gifts of several generous people as well as the accommodations of my professors at Rosedale made it possible for me to go.

After the excitement of traveling to San Carlos, a village at the very head of the San Juan River, we settled in at Cabinas Leyko, the hotel where we stayed for two weeks. While each day was unique, a typical day might look something like this: I would usually wake up without my alarm around 6:00. The roosters did a good job of making sure that no one slept in. After breakfast, we would aim to be at the clinic by 8:00. After singing and praying with the patients who were waiting in line, we would go into the clinic and people would begin to be registered. The clinic was held in a school; different classrooms were used as separate stations. There was a station for registration, general eyesight evaluation, eye examination, refraction, surgery scheduling, and for giving and fitting both reading and prescription glasses. Also, some people from our group worked at...
the hospital in the operating room performing a variety of surgeries.

I spent my time in the eye examination room. I was responsible for running the auto-refractor, a little machine that took the dimensions of the eye and gave an approximate prescription for glasses. This helped the doctors decide whether or not to send the patient for refraction (further determination of the lens power needed), and sometimes also helped determine how badly a cataract or other problem was obstructing vision. In addition to running the auto-refractor, I helped by giving drops to dilate the eyes of those who needed further examination. Everyone was busy in their jobs at the clinic, with a continuous stream of people coming through. We would usually have lunch around 12:30 and then continue working through the afternoon. We kept working until everyone who had been registered that day had been seen; we were usually done around five o’clock.

After closing up the clinic, we ate supper. Sometimes groups of people went to the market or walked around the town afterwards. At 7:00 every evening, we had a team meeting. This was a time in which people could share stories from the day, both touching and funny. We would also discuss how the day went, and how we could be more efficient or how to handle certain situations. After the meeting, a group of us sometimes walked to the Eskimo ice cream shop to get a treat. Generally, I was ready for bed by about 9:00, although I sometimes spent time reading for my classes back at Rosedale. When I was finished, I always fell asleep very quickly after a tiring day.

The patients we served were from a variety of places. Many of them came from San Carlos, but many also traveled from the outlying areas. In some of the remote communities the clinic had been announced on the radio, and some of the people who came had walked or boated for several hours to get there. They were willing to travel this distance and then spend much of the day waiting in line, so that they could get eye care. According to our standards, the people who came to the clinic were quite poor.

Despite the long days and tired feet, I really enjoyed the work. I realized more what it means to be a servant to others. I really admired the people I worked with too. All of them were kind to the patients and treated them professionally. The doctors were also very friendly to me and taught me a lot about the eye, letting me peer inside sometimes. I was even able to go into the OR and watch a cataract surgery! These experiences gave me a new appreciation for and interest in the medical field.

The trip was not just work; I also had a lot of fun. Over the weekend we traveled by boat down the San Juan River and visited an old Spanish fortress, El Castillo. We stayed overnight at a place on the river. A high-
light for me was a hike through the rainforest; we saw a lot of different birds and plant life. Later, we took a boat up a tributary of the San Juan and went swimming. Along the river we saw monkeys, toucans, turtles, and other wildlife. We also had a very memorable experience on our way back to San Carlos, when our boat ran out of gas! We had to wait in the boat in the dark, amidst a cloud of hungry mosquitoes, until we were “rescued.” Another remarkable experience I had was watching the sun set over the water of Lake Nicaragua; it was the most beautiful sunset I have ever seen.

I learned so much even apart from the medical side of the trip. This was my first trip outside of the United States and Canada, so it was a new cultural experience for me. Of course I met new people, ate new foods, and did new things. I also learned a lot about flexibility; when you spend time in a Latin American country, you realize what flexibility really means. I discovered that waiting for something really is not as bad as you might think. I also gained more appreciation for the simple things in life. A shower is so much more welcome after a tiring day, especially when it’s not guaranteed that the water will actually make an appearance.

My time in Nicaragua also caused me to more seriously consider short-term missions. Partly because of my experience, I am now planning on participating in REACH in the coming year. I also learned a lot from seeing how the people there lived. They really had very little compared with what we enjoy. It helped me to see that all the things that we think are so necessary are really not as important as we make them. I especially learned more about trusting God. God had a hand in every part of the trip, from my getting involved in the trip in the first place, to helping me deal with missing friends and family. I found that I discovered in a new way what it means to cast your burdens on Jesus.

If you are perhaps considering a short-term missions experience, I would encourage you to grab the opportunity! When the chance for me to participate in this trip first came up, I was quite skeptical. I just assumed that it probably would not work out, and did not really want to spend time investigating it. Some of my friends encouraged me to at least check it out; I am certainly glad that I did. God worked out everything that I needed to participate in the trip. It may not have been the easiest option (I had to do a lot of working ahead and catching up in my classes), but I would not trade the experiences or the things I learned. Who knows how God may use your experience to change your life!

Kristen is from Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. She just finished her first year at Rosedale this spring, and is considering the possibility of returning after REACH. Currently in REACH training, she’s excited to be headed for Nepal at the end of November.