

Writer reflects on recent mission trip to Guatemala

By Tabitha Wells

The country of Guatemala is exceedingly beautiful, with vast mountains, rolling landscapes, huge sugarcane and corn fields, and more than 20 volcanoes, of which several are still active.

The political and social disarray caused by a 36-year civil war has left the people in a state of distrust. Drug and crime lords have too much control, and the government only cares for the small portion of people that are wealthy enough to help them remain in power. In Guatemala, there is no such thing as middle class. They are either poor or rich, and while the levels of poverty may vary, the need is great. The majority of children only make it to the third or sixth grade before they are pulled from school to help their parents in the markets, or simply because they cannot afford to go to school any longer.

I recently returned home from my second Mission Trip to Guatemala with Broadway Pentecostal Church in Orangeville. It was the fifth year our church has sent a team down to stay with PAOC Missionaries Hector and Ruth Aragon, who live in Guatemala City. On a mission trip, the expectation is that we are there to change and impact lives, and to help people in moving forward within their own communities. What you rarely expect is the impact it will have on yourself.

Our first few days were spent at a girls' orphanage, which was really more like what we would consider a group home or halfway house.

There was one girl in particular who I connected with quickly. Her name was Paula, and much to my delight, she spoke English quite well. Within about an hour of being around each other, we connected instantly over our shared taste in music.

Paula was beautiful and kind, and seemed to have a presence of maturity that some of the other girls lacked. During our talk, I found out that she was 17, and had married at 15. It was shocking, but not something unheard of in Guatemala.

At one point, I got the courage to ask why she was there, and she shared her story. Eight years ago, her father and mother abandoned her ? while her father was still in the house, he wanted nothing to do with either her or her brother. She eventually got involved with drugs and developed a drinking problem leading up to her wedding.

Shortly after she got married, she found herself in trouble with the police and was sentenced to a year in a juvenile detention centre. Six months in, she escaped and ran away, but was caught and taken back.

The orphanage was her punishment for fleeing juvi, but the length of her term was unknown. She was to return in front of a judge Feb. 24 to find out whether she will be sent to another orphanage, or allowed to return home to her husband under house arrest. She was terrified, and she told me she was completely alone, and felt unloved and unwanted.

My heart broke for her, and I wanted nothing more than to show her and remind her that she was loved. The night before our final farewells, I decided to write Paula a letter of encouragement, as well as the Bible verse that got me through my hardest times to remind her to hang on, and packaged up one of my necklaces to go with it. It was a big heart pendant ? a way for her to have something to remind her she was loved.

I pulled her aside and gave her my gifts, and she began to cry. Holding the necklace in her hands, she looked up at me and said, ?I look at you, and I know you love me. I haven't done anything to earn your love, but you love me anyways. Because of you, I know that's how God loves me too. No matter what, I will know at least you and God love me.?

It took everything in me not to start weeping. With those few words, Paula did more for me than I believe I did for her. In that moment, she showed me why we do what we do ? and she showed me something I had never seen before. Because just as I loved her unconditionally despite her flaws, she too loved me the same. And that love, reminded me of the same thing it had reminded her ? that God does love me, no matter what, which is something that I had been struggling with. In that moment, she reminded me what it is to be a Christian ? that we are to love, just as Christ loved us, sins, flaws and all.

Not a day has gone by since leaving that I haven't thought about Paula, and wondered how she is doing. I don't think a day will go by where I don't think about her again. She serves as a reminder to me not just about how good we really have it here, but about how many people there are out there who's biggest need is something we all have in abundance ? love, and the knowledge that they are not alone in facing our struggles.