

Guatemala: *Salvation Arrives on Wheels*

By Gus Ruchman



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: THE GROUP POSES BEFORE SETTING OFF ON THE FIRST EVER WHEELCHAIR DISTRIBUTION BY TRAIN >>> DAVID BEHRING AND GUS RUCHMAN ASSEMBLE A WHEELCHAIR >>> WHEELCHAIRS BRING JOY TO PREVIOUSLY IMMOBILE PEOPLE

From March 13 to 17 of 2007, the Princeton University Class of 1977 teamed up with the Wheelchair Foundation and local Rotary groups in Guatemala to deliver 560 wheelchairs to people in need. Guatemala is a country of 12.3 million people, 80% of whom live below the poverty line, with 7.6 million living in “extreme poverty.” About half the population is under eighteen years of age. Out of every thousand live births, nearly thirty-seven infants die. The literacy rate in Guatemala is 70.6%, and in addition to Spanish, twenty-four indigenous languages are spoken.

Drastic poverty is just one of the problems that the people of Guatemala face. A lack of clean drinking water accounts for 80% of the diseases that make the use of wheelchairs necessary, and malnutrition is pervasive. Deficient prenatal care may explain the extraordinary incidence of spina bifida, perhaps the highest in the world. A thirty-six year guerrilla civil war, which ended in 1996, left the country war-torn and unstable, and violent crime is prevalent.

On our first day of wheelchair distributions, we departed by bus from the colonial city of Antigua and subsequently switched over to train, courtesy of Ferrovias de Guatemala. The rails to Guastatoya,



our destination, were lined with shacks and small villages. Against the backdrop of a welcoming band and homemade fireworks, we distributed wheelchairs, toys, and bracelets to our first group of recipients, most of whom were either very old or very young, and who exhibited a variety of disabilities. After another rail ride through the desert, we arrived at El Rancho for our second distribution.

Sede de las Obras Sociales del Hermano Pedro, we distributed wheelchairs to children with severe mental and physical conditions. Many of the patients at this facility live there because they were abandoned by their parents. When we visited the elderly homes of Casa Maria and Cabecitas de Algodón, we were surprised to learn that sometimes grown children abandon their parents as well. Some of the elderly with whom we visited were deserted by their families because of their disabilities.

We finished the day with an excursion to P.A.V.A., an organization that provides scholarships to promising students in a country where continuing studies past the third grade is a celebration and going to high school is extremely rare. Students participating in P.A.V.A. often need to help support their families or travel long distances to school, examples of the difficulties that young Guatemalans confront.

On our final day of deliveries, we went to the Church of Tzumpango. There we distributed 102 wheelchairs, mostly to indigenous people, many of whom were picking up the chairs for relatives who were unable to come from outlying villages. After visiting an orphanage, we proceeded to Guatemala City for a final distribution at the presidential palace.

The Wheelchair Foundation has delivered almost 580,000 wheelchairs in 150 countries. Thanks to the Princeton Class of ‘77, there are now another 560 fully functional wheelchairs helping bring mobility to the people of Guatemala.

