

Chippewa Falls Dentist Leads Humanitarian, Educational Mission to Bolivia

First in a series

By Mark Baker
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As we crossed over the spine of the Andes Mountains, the right wing of the Boeing 727 lifted slightly, banking the jet left to begin our landing approach.

Below, in the gray of early morning, lay the airport in Cochabamba, Bolivia. The tarmac gleamed with wetness due to a gentle rain.

Onboard the Lloyd Aereo Boliviano jet was more than two dozen Americans and Canadians, taking part in an eight-day humanitarian and educational mission to Bolivia, a country about the size of Texas and California combined.

The event was organized, just as it has been the previous 18 years, by Dr. David Crane of Chippewa Falls.

Dr. Crane's mother, Jeannie, had a cousin who was a Maryknoll priest. He did missionary work in Bolivia for a total of 52 years. In the early 1980s, the priest invited David and his wife, Vicky, to Cochabamba for a week's visit.

The Cranes decided to make the trip. They came away impressed by the beauty of the people and the country. They were determined not only to provide humanitarian assistance to its residents, but to teach outsiders about its unique culture. So for the next 19 years, they've organized an annual trip to Cochabamba.

Today in Bolivia, Dr. Crane is widely respected for the humanitarian work he's spearheaded in the Cochabamba region.

Bolivia is a country of contrasts.

Cochabamba is a city of 500,000 lying in a valley 8,200 ft. above sea level. Its climate is temperate, much like San Diego.

To the north and west is La Paz, the country's capital, nestled in at 12,000 ft. on the high plains. Its climate is cool due to its increased elevation.

To the south and east is Santa Cruz, known as the business and economic engine of Bolivia, 350 ft., in what is known as the lowlands. Its climate is hot and humid. The Chapare -- which covers one-third of the country -- contains the western part of the Amazon Jungle.

The country is blessed with an abundance of oil and natural gas. It is self-sufficient for most of its energy needs, even selling surplus natural gas to some of its neighbors.

The area around Cochabamba is known for its fertile fields, where livestock and grains are grown to feed the native population.

But the country has its challenges.

Some of the biggest include the concentration of wealth in the hands of a relatively few people; a national government that turns over on an almost annual basis; and a strained relationship with the United States, which continues to attack its coca production in the war against illegal drugs.

On this year's trip, most participants are here because of one of several programs that have been created since David and Vicky Crane's first trip.

The primary focus of the trip is volunteer dental work.

Program participants include dentists from San Diego, Seattle, Albuquerque and Santa Fe. There are dental hygienists and assistants from Chippewa Falls, La Crosse, and even Calgary, British Columbia. There's a sprinkling of pre-dental students, including two Minnesotans who now attend the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, and a Chippewa Falls native who just got admitted to the University of Michigan dental program.

Debbie Sutton works for Dr. Crane in Chippewa Falls. Her husband, Bob, is a business professor at UW-Eau Claire. They've brought their two children, Spencer, a junior at Memorial, and Diana, a sophomore, during spring break.

Jenny Goares of Elma, Washington, is returning for a second year. She's a talented artist, a water painter, who comes to learn Spanish and gather fresh ideas for her art.

Myrna Manier is a retired school teacher.

Dr. Sherwin Schinn and his wife, Jerri, a registered nurse, first participated in this mission 16 years ago. They were so taken by the work and what they observed, they've not only returned year after year, they've started offshoot programs to promote strong relations between the two countries (more on that in subsequent articles).

Andrew Dane and I are on this trip because of our involvement with the Chippewa Falls Rotary Club. Dr. Crane is a long-time member of the club, which has supported his efforts over the years. Andrew works for the UW-Extension Service in Chippewa and Barron counties. He went to Bolivia for the first time in 2005 to help with a Rotary water project. He's returning this year to see how the project is taking shape.

I'm along because I've heard the stories about Cochabamba from Dr. Crane for almost two decades. As a fellow Rotarian, I'm interested in Dr. Crane's work among the poor and disadvantaged in Bolivia. I want to see for myself, and come back to Chippewa Falls and tell the story.

At the airport, as MPs surround our plane, we're guided through customs. Officials check our passports and stamp our visas. We're good for up to 30 days. We go downstairs to claim our luggage. Suitcases are mixed in with three dozen big Rubbermaid containers. Each tub contains dental supplies – such as toothbrushes or medication – or donated items, including t-shirts, baseball hats or beanie babies.

We get our first look at Bolivia as we are bused to our home-away-from-home, the Hotel Diplomat in downtown Cochabamba. As we bounce through town on streets that are sometimes paved, sometimes cobblestone, cows graze along the median. Roadside stalls, nothing more than branches holding up blue plastic tarp, cover goods and foodstuffs. Everywhere, shelves are stacked with two liter bottles of Coca Cola and orange Fanta for sale.

We finally arrive at our destination. The Hotel Diplomat is classy by any standards, with polished marble floors and beautifully stained wood. The desk staff is very courteous, with most speaking English fluently. They are always willing to help, and cheerfully, whether to change American dollars to Bolivianos (eight “Bees” to the dollar) or to arrange a taxi to take you to the market.

Group members, tired from the long flight from Miami, make our way to our respective rooms to unpack, clean up and perhaps catch a brief nap to adjust to the altitude. In a few hours, we'll meet in the hotel's dining room for our first briefing by Dr. Crane and Dr. Shinn.