

# Volunteering Matters

Contributed by Lisa Steinmann

“Beautiful” is the word Dr. Fritz Morlock uses most often to describe the abandoned children of Cochabamba, Bolivia. He encountered them last March when he and his wife, Lynda, traveled to Bolivia as members of an annual humanitarian and educational expedition that provides dental care in clinics serving homeless and orphaned children in Cochabamba.

During a two-week period, they worked in clinics that are part of Amanecer, a program run by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul that offers shelter, education, and medical and dental services. Foreign volunteers like the Morlocks work alongside Bolivian doctors, dentists and nurses.

Fritz Morlock learned about the program through the work of Dr. David Crane, of Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. Crane runs a seminar program, Dental Seminars & Symposia, that includes international continuing education and humanitarian endeavors for dental professionals.

The program works with the International Smile Power Foundation and supports its mission to restore and sustain dental health around the world.

When he retired a year and a half ago, after over 20 years as chief of dental services at HealthPartners’ St. Paul clinic, Morlock found himself with some dental supplies he no longer needed. Crane’s international program came to mind.

When Morlock contacted Crane and mentioned the donation he wanted to make, Crane said he wasn’t interested in simply taking the supplies. He said to Morlock, “You need to come down [to Bolivia] and be a part of the program.”

“It took us a little time to decide,” says Morlock. Neither he nor his wife speak Spanish. Although retired, they are active in the community and stay busy helping care for parents and grandchildren. Ultimately, they decided they “could and should” travel to Bolivia.

Morlock describes the Amanecer facilities as “orphanages” but explains that since most of these children have parents, they will never qualify for adoption. Because of poverty and related problems — alcoholism and domestic abuse — children are often abandoned or run away from home. Some fall into drug abuse, delinquency or prostitution.

Children as young as two, three and four years old are found wandering in bus stations and at public markets. Staff or the police bring the children to Amanecer, where they are placed according to their ages and needs.

Morlock spent time filling cavities and performing root canals for teenage boys who came for one of Amanecer’s day programs. The boys are provided with meals and a place to clean up and do homework. If they stay off drugs, they can move into a residential facility and study vocational skills.

Some of the boys Morlock treated would arrive “high” for their dental exam. Morlock says that “huffing glue” is a big problem. He saw kids sitting on the streets of Cochabamba with their T-shirts pulled over their faces as they breathed in glue vapors.

Lynda Morlock worked at a residence for girls and women with children who are extremely poor and striving to make a better life for themselves. Her skills as a St. Anthony Park block nurse came in handy as she helped in this program that offers assistance with health, education and employment.

The Morlocks brought along tubs of supplies donated by Marcus Dental Supply and HealthPartners.

They also brought quilts created by Wisconsin students who learned about the children of Cochabamba through an educational program designed by a U.S. artist who volunteers with the Bolivia program.

Students draw pictures on scraps of fabric that are sewn together into quilts to send to the Amanecer homes. The Morlocks were honored to bring the 2,000th quilt with them to Cochabamba.

“The children were beautiful, friendly, easy to work with,” says Morlock. “They loved attention. They climbed all over us.”

So much for retirement. The Morlocks are planning another trip to Bolivia. It’s the kind of volunteering that Fritz Morlock says is a case where “we gained more than we gave.”