

The Flying Doctors--Locals help give medical aid to Mexico

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by Abby Hutchison

For many of us gringos, Baja, Mexico is a vacation destination for fishing in the Sea of Cortez, warm, clear water, surf and sunsets.

Baja was not really much more than that for Truckee's Don Schaller until he joined Bob Horvath on a Flying Doctors trip to a small town called St. Ignacio, located midway down the the Baja Peninsula, in October 2000. On that four-day trip, Schaller didn't bring along his bathing suit or snorkeling gear.

Flying Doctors (or Los Medicos Voladores), based out of the Bay Area, is a medical group that helps patients in poor Mexican villages. The nonprofit volunteer group of approximately 300 doctors, nurses, other health care workers, interpreters and pilots, all who live in Northern California, donate their weekends to help Mexicans who are without access to medical care.

Typically they will travel to Mexico for a four-day weekend and see patients three of the four days. Often they will fly patients who need significant operations or specialized medical treatment back to hospitals in the United States. They bring along dental equipment, syringes, hypodermic needles, antibiotics and vaccines as well as clothing and other supplies donated by various Californian communities.



"I started going down to Baja 10 years ago, mostly on vacations," Schaller said. "Mexico is really not Cabos San Lucas to me - it's where the people live and the people there are so wonderful."

He rode in Horvath's plane to St. Ignacio to volunteer with Dennis LeBlanc, Tahoe-Truckee High School principal, and his brother-in-law Kim Christensen.

On that trip, the team brought Arturo and his son Francisco from St. Ignacio back to California so they could both have operations in Sacramento. Arturo, who lost his legs, was given sophisticated prosthetic legs and Ferdinand, who was born with webbed hands, underwent delicate surgery on both hands. Following recovery time in the Sacramento area, the two Mexican natives stayed with Dennis LeBlanc in Truckee and were welcomed into the community by a number of Truckee residents.



"There is a bond I think between all peoples. Things like (Flying Doctors) explore that bond," Schaller said.

Bob Horvath, a Truckee businessman and pilot, has been flying doctors, dentists, volunteers, interpreters and other health professionals to Mexico since 1994 through the Flying Doctors Gold Country Chapter out of Auburn. He has flown on 22 missions, each time taking five people along in his Beechcraft Baron, a twin engine plane that seats six, to various communities in rural Mexico and throughout Baja.

The team usually sets up their clinic after they arrive on Thursday evening and see patients on Friday and half of the day Saturday before getting some rest and relaxation. On Sunday, the team flies back to the U.S.



“It’s exhausting for the physicians and dentists because they’re torn in a number of different directions,” said Horvath, who donates his airplane, his time and his piloting skills and gets money back from the organization to cover costs.

While the clinic is active, Horvath and other team volunteers help in any way they can, often running the odd errands that allow the team to operate efficiently and serve as many patients in a day as possible.

One time Horvath went out to find butane to heat up a torch so a dentist could make dentures for a patient.

“It’s an interesting thing to try to find butane in the middle of Baja,” Horvath said. He finally tracked down a small amount of butane that someone was using in a lighter to light a cigar.

Lynn Meadows, also a Truckee pilot, is a member of the Flying Doctors and went as a general volunteer to Mexico with a vision team in November 1999. They brought hundreds of pairs of donated prescription eye glasses and reading glasses and attempted to match prescriptions to patients.

Out of approximately 160 patients, the team gave 90 people eyeglasses at the clinic.

“I was amazed at what we got done,” Meadows said. “I was elated because I had just done something wonderful.”

She said one gentleman had ridden a horse for an hour to get to the road where he could be picked up by car to get to the clinic.

“You stay there until you’ve seen everyone in line, sometimes until late at night,” she said. “While you’re there, you’re caught up in the activities and everything that’s happening. Later, when you have time to reflect you realize what you did and you want to go back and do it again. It’s just a powerful experience.”

Generally, the team’s main purpose is to provide medical care, but along with care comes education in health-related topics by the volunteers. And the small communities the flying doctors serve are grateful and genuinely appreciative of the help. In return they are often housed and fed a meal that equal a whole month’s wages for the locals. They often greet the team as they arrive with baked goods and curious and eager smiles.

“There’s nothing but love and fun in the organization. No matter what kind of situation you run into, you always walk away with the feeling of love,” Horvath said.

Other local pilots and volunteers who help or have helped the Flying Doctors are Kim Kjos, Susan Bruno, Rob Lober and Dick Studer.

Local members of the Flying Doctors are throwing an appreciation party for community members who helped make Arturo and Francisco’s stay in Truckee and Sacramento a wonderful experience tonight at the Truckee-Tahoe Airport at 6 p.m.

For information about becoming a Flying Doctor member or volunteer, visit the organization's website:
www.flyingdocs.org