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  Dr. Vicky Guzman de Luna, Founder and Director
ASAPROSAR

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By Eloise D. Clawson (5/2008)
Revised (11/2010)
Dr. Vicky Guzman

Dr. Vicky Guzman, founder and director of ASAPROSAR (Salvadoran Association for Rural Health) started her work in 1972. She dared to take health care to remote, rural mountain areas on horseback, by foot, by bus or train which was scandalous for a woman doctor to do so. Poverty, illiteracy, and disease were rampant and many children died of diarrhea, malnutrition and parasites. Most families had no access to health care and preventive medicine was unknown.

Dr. Vicky Guzman believed people have a right to basic health care and medical attention should not be dictated by political interests or wealth. Methodically and patiently she listened to the villagers, collected useful information about their concerns, and explored possible solutions with them. Campesino leaders were identified by their communities and trained as health promoters.

It is a story of respect and understanding of culture and traditions. Vicky worked side by side, shoulder to shoulder with campesinos, to improve the health of people living in extreme poverty. When a child died she gathered the villagers together to discuss what had happened, what they could do to protect their other children, and answered the questions of “why?” and “how come?”

Dr. Vicky Guzman also learned from the wisdom of the villagers. On one occasion she was almost certain an unconscious pregnant woman was suffering from the complications of diabetes. But the community refused to allow the patient to leave the village. Having no sophisticated laboratory equipment to demonstrate the problem, Dr. Guzman gathered the leaders together to explain diabetes. Listening intently, one of the illiterate men asked, “Did you say the sugar is in the blood and in the urine?” She nodded yes. “Well, said the campesino, “You put some of her urine on the ground right here, and I’ll urinate on the ground over there. Then we can see where the ants go. If she has sugar in her urine, that’s where the ants will be”. Within minutes they watched in amazement as the woman’s urine became covered by tiny insects. Dr. Guzman recalls that this was the first of many, many lessons she learned from the rural peasant families.
To empower illiterate and disenfranchised people was a dangerous threat to the status quo. Generations considered the rural campesinos as objects for exploitation. Dr. Guzman was upsetting the established norm. Her actions were viewed as subversive in a political climate that soon festered into a 12 year civil war. She was followed, her workers persecuted, their homes burned, some were killed, she was imprisoned and suffered the atrocities of the war.

In 1986, following her imprisonment and house arrest, she wanted to return to her work in the country. Dr. Vicky Guzman recognized that first she must legally establish ASAPROSAR in order to provide protection and validity for her rural health program and for the safety of her workers. Thirty-six years later, her personal commitment has been rewarded. Today ASAPROSAR serves approximately 100,000 persons living on the margins of society in extreme poverty.

*Dr. Vicky Guzman is a visionary with the core belief that health is a basic human right. The mission of ASAPROSAR is to “Improve the quality of life for the neediest families of El Salvador through integration and linking of programs to meet the fundamental needs of sanitation, environment, education, culture, economics and health. Priority is given to children, youth and women of the rural areas and marginalized urban settings.”*

The composite photo contains scenery from El Salvador. It reaches from the ocean to the volcanoes and its history stretches from the Nahuat Pipiles and Mayans to the assassination of Archbishop Romero in the Divina Providencia chapel.
ASAPROSAR serves a variety of people in different capacities for a holistic approach to development
ASAPROSAR recognizes that what happens in the family setting is reflected in the lives and opportunities available for their children. Family dynamics, exploitation, gender traditions, illiteracy, violence, and twelve years of civil war are the backdrop of the work of ASAPROSAR.
In 1986 ASAPROSAR established their first three rural community clinics, trained indigenous leaders and health promoters. To date they have trained more than 1000 of their own health promoters and also train health promoters for the Ministry of Health and other Non-Governmental Organizations from the region.

Components of Health Program are:
- Preventive health
- Family nutrition, with emphasis on children less than 5 years of age
- Basic Sanitation
- Health education and training
- Prevention of transmission of HIV/AIDS
- Monitoring epidemiology of communities
- Prenatal, birth, postpartum care, and newborn follow-up
- Monitoring of growth and development, nutritional status, and vaccinations of infants and children.
- Integrated attention to adolescents (reproductive health education, healthy behaviors, leadership training)
- Prevention and early treatment of cervical cancer
- Family planning
- Intervention for community environmental risk factors (ie. latrines, waste disposal, water protection)

Among the harmful effects upon health of children and youth living in poverty are:
- Infant mortality rate of 10 per 1000 live births
- High pregnancy rates for girls 10-15 years of age
- Malnutrition (4 of every 10 children has some form of malnutrition)
- Epidemics such as hemorrhagic dengue fever which recently claimed the lives of 3 children less than six years of age
- HIV-AIDS (2,500 children are infected according to government data but they only have the capacity to care for 500 children and the rest die without medical attention)

All the programs of ASAPROSAR are available to the children, youth, and their families while participating in any of the programs or projects of ASAPROSAR. This includes health care, youth programs, eye care, microcredit, environment and agricultural support, nutrition, community education and training.
CHILDREN AND YOUTH PROGRAM

From the very beginning, ASAPROSAR focused on mothers and children, the most vulnerable in society. The war ended, extreme poverty remained and children of all ages were obligated to enter the workforce.

Often they were required to work more than 12 hours daily in the marketplace selling vegetables, fruit, pastries, clothing, meals or tortillas. Children worked on the buses and in high risk jobs. Boys and girls scavenged in the dump for food or searched for items to re-sell. The environment of the dump was polluted. It contained hospital wastes, needles and syringes, toxic solutions, and spoiled food from restaurants. Acrid smoke and fire from spontaneous combustion produced burns, skin and respiratory diseases. In addition, the children and youth were subjected to harassment, sexual abuse, mistreatment and violence by their family or by the adults working in the area.

Poverty forces children and adolescents to confront other social ills such as lack of family structure, exclusion and exploitation by adults. There are no laws in El Salvador to protect children and youth, their basic rights are denied and society seems to ignore their plight.

ASAPROSAR offers two programs to address the needs of children and youth living in poverty and marginalized from society.

The **Barefoot Angels’ Program** is for 6-18 year olds living and working in the marketplace or in the city dump area.

*Barefoot Angels ages 6-18 years of age receive educational and leadership training*
The Sprouts of Hope Program is for children ages 0-6 years, living in rural or urban marginalized regions.

**BAREFOOT ANGELS**

The majority of the youth who come to the Barefoot Angels’ program have suffered violence, sexual and/or physical abuse, accosted by gangs, child prostitution, etc. In response, the primary focus of the Barefoot Angels is to provide psychological care, formal school reinforcement, games, recreation, leadership training and opportunities to learn how to negotiate/ have a business or livelihood. Work is done with the family groups to assure parents are not violating the rights of their children. Themes such as self-esteem, intra-family violence, forms of punishment, and dreams for the future are examples of topics explored with the family and the Barefoot Angels.

Currently there are 700 children and youth in the Barefoot Angels program. 175 Barefoot Angels in the program near the Marketplace/ Bus Terminal. There are 135 Barefoot Angels who live and work around the Camones city dump area. ASAPROSAR is dedicated to helping them change the directions of their lives.

Recent studies in El Salvador indicate that more than one million children enroll in school, but 25% drop out of classes for economic reasons (ie. leaving school to look for work.) It is estimated that approximately 30,000 children work in high-risk conditions such as cutting sugarcane, collecting garbage, child prostitution, ambulatory vendors in the marketplace/ bus terminal, subject to abuse and exploitation.

As in many Central American countries, gangs are an additional obstacle of gigantic proportion and one that is striking the population of El Salvador. The rapid emergence of violent gangs is spreading throughout the region and their recruitment has focused especially on those living in poverty. Many of the gangs are young minors who have organized and have become delinquents in order to defend their identity, their territory, and their membership in a group. The child worker is vulnerable to gangs because of their precarious economics, lack of opportunities, disintegrated family situations, and the very fact that they are child laborers.

Dangers and threats from gang members have become the greatest obstacles to the work of ASAPROSAR. Barefoot Angels have been intimidated, harassed, injured and killed because they refused to join the gang Mara 18 or Salvatrucha. The environment of drugs, prostitution and family violence is added to this volatile mix.

Why use the name “Barefoot Angels”? The figure of a barefoot angel does not represent a Christian figure of perfection, rather a figure symbolizing a human being that is vulnerable in childhood, but with wings that are strong and developing through all they learn. It is to have opportunities to be someone different in spite of their conditions. The barefoot angel also symbolizes a commitment to multiply their learning with other children who live in similar conditions of poverty and dangerous work.

To be a Barefoot Angel is to be a boy, girl, or an adolescent with a vision of a positive life, with dreams for the future, a community leader, a person in solidarity with the neediest, and the main actor in their own development.
SPROUTS OF HOPE

The Sprouts of Hope program is designed to work with marginalized children 0 – 6 years of age living in extreme conditions of poverty. Sprouts of Hope classrooms are in the marketplace, Camones city dump area, and held on the porches or in homes of the rural communities.

Sprouts of Hope program has two modalities.

- Children are monitored in their homes from birth to 3 years of age. Normal growth and development, nutrition and healthy stimulation of the child are supervised by trained promoters as the parents learn new skills in childrearing.

- Children 3-6 years of age attend the small rural classes for early stimulation, evaluation of normal growth / development and nutritional status. Early intervention strategies are implemented for deficiencies.

Parental participation is paramount. Parents are expected to be active in healthy child-rearing practices and with proper discipline. They assist with the preparation of daily snacks at the Sprouts of Hope classes which is one way to address the wide-spread malnutrition of the children. Parents also participate in basic hygiene and sanitation of their homes and community.
Last year 370 families and 425 children attended the Sprouts of Hope program for children 3-6 years of age. In addition 140 families took part in the home visit program of newborns through 3 years of age. ASAPROSAR is pleased to report that by the end of the year 97% of the children were classified as normal nutrition for their ages and 82% of the families improved their basic hygiene, sanitation and child rearing practices.

With Dr. Vicky Guzman and ASAPROSAR leading the way, other governmental and non-governmental organizations are joining together to address the issues of children’s rights. Laws and policies for children are being established. Educational institutions are encouraged to become involved. Changes are occurring. ASAPROSAR celebrates the small successes of the families and their children. For example, youth are becoming leaders, teens are graduating from high school, and girls are recognizing new opportunities as they plan their futures empowered by gender equality.

*It is the resiliency of the children and their families as they confront the obstacles of poverty, natural disasters, gangs, and exploitation that motivates Dr. Vicky Guzman and ASAPROSAR to continue their struggle to make the world a more just and peaceful place to live, one that includes a future with opportunities and recognizes the potential of the children and adults.*

**VISUAL HEALTH**

Twenty years ago Dr. Vicky Guzman held the first eye campaign for people living in abject poverty with no access to eye care. Collaboration was done with Friends of ASPAPROSAR from Massachusetts and this partnership continues annually.

Today the ASAPROSAR visual health program has expanded nationally providing corrective glasses, surgery and treatment of multiple eye conditions. Rural school children are monitored and a mobile unit travels throughout the region.
There are three components to the ASAPROSAR Visual Health Program:

- **The Permanent Clinic Program** at Santa Ana and San Miguel cared for approximately 25,000 persons last year, 800 surgeries were done, and 10,500 eyeglasses distributed, as well as general medical consults and prescriptions were provided.

- **The Mobile Clinic** travels to remote rural regions of the country in zones identified as severe extreme poverty areas. Approximately 30,000 persons were examined by optometry in those communities. This is a Free Care service.

- **Volunteer International Ophthalmology/Optometry campaigns** assist more than 3,600 persons annually and provide surgery (cataracts, pterygium, strabismus, corneal transplants, and other abnormalities). Volunteers are from Friends of ASAPROSAR (Massachusetts), Benevolent Mission International (Texas) and Medical Teams International (Oregon).

It should be noted that last year 78% of patients received free care and a sliding scale was used to determine payment possibilities for the rest.

*Photos of the Friends of ASAPROSAR International Eye Campaign*
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Feliciana with her goats

Agro-ecology of small species of animals (patterned after Heifer Project International)

- Programs such as nutrition, environment, and sustainable agriculture are woven together with raising small species of animals to address the health needs of the community.
- Selection of families living in extreme poverty ($100 / month family of five).
- Goats, ducks, chickens, rabbits are selected and “passing on the gift” of the first offspring to another family continues the process.
- Education in the care of animals, reproduction, and sustainable agriculture is provided.
- Emphasis on latrines, potable water, garbage disposal, wells and, when possible, electricity, are all integrated into this program.
- Minor species of animals such as goats, chickens, ducks, rabbits and bees are integral to the maintenance of the nutritional health of the children and the elderly. This impact is monitored carefully.
- By participating in this nutritional program with small animals, the family has the option of also becoming part of the microcredit program where small business loans are available to families living in poverty, with scant resources, and little or no collateral.
Environmental discussion

Environment

- Forest Rangers working for ASAPROSAR protect the Magdalena mountain forest conservation area. They are the principal educators and protectors of the environment in this region.
- Three school centers and four Patrol groups have been trained to prevent cutting trees and forest fires.
- Community leaders are trained as volunteer conservation guides for visitors to the area. They study of local fauna and are resources for education and conservation tours. Community participation is paramount.
- Cleaning campaigns are scheduled at school centers.
- Natural resources of water, environment, wildlife are protected.

Natural disasters have impacted the people and areas served by ASAPROSAR.

- The destruction of the 2001 earthquake in El Salvador caused massive damage and loss of life in areas served by ASAPROSAR.
- Later Hurricane Mitch unleashed its fury as it hit the Central American countries.
- In 2005 the earth responded in awakening the activity of the Santa Ana Volcano, Llamatepec, which had been dormant for years. Warnings were issued by the government and the country was put on alert. In preparation for a possible volcanic eruption ASAPROSAR contacted firefighters who worked at Mt. Saint Helen during its eruption. Three volunteers came from the U.S. to help prepare the villagers for the possibility of the eruption of Llamatepec. Escape routes were marked, children, elderly and the infirm were
identified. Community leaders were organized and learned emergency firefighting techniques.

After weeks of earth tremors, on October 1st, 2005, the volcano began to spew forth hot gases, molten rocks, and caustic ashes as it erupted, blowing out the side of the mountain. Because of the emergency preparation of the community, the loss of life was minimal, but over 20,000 people living on the side of the volcano lost everything and became homeless. ASAPROSAR was present in the community hours after the eruption and continues to be primary health workers in the area supporting families as they attempt to recover from the disaster. Healing is long term for children and families reliving the terror of fleeing for their lives. ASAPROSAR’s presence is vital to families living in poverty and extreme poverty, who now face the added challenges of an uncertain future.

- Days after Volcano Llamatepec erupted, Hurricane Stan hit the shores of El Salvador with resulting winds, mudslides and loss of life. The sides of the erupted volcano were vulnerable to further disaster and the people suffered.
  (note: This was just days before Katrina hit the coast of Louisiana)

ASAPROSAR continues to work with displaced families who lost everything with the eruption of Illamatepec. Some live in low-income houses near the Camones city dump. Others are “squatters” in shelters made of carton, wood and tin. Often they have no access to potable water, no electricity, no latrines, nor ability to dispose of garbage properly.

Photos of the Minor Species program so critical in combating malnutrition
MICRO CREDIT

*Microcredit Circle meeting*

The Rural Credit Program is modeled after the world renowned program of the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh (Dr. Mohammad Yunus received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 for this work). The model consists of small groups of 5 women from the same community, providing support and solidarity to each member. Later a Center will be formed, which consists of six small credit groups, making a total of 30 members at each Center.

Weekly meetings are conducted for training and managing their business loans. Loans may start out as low as $50 - $100. As the debt is cancelled, additional amounts of loans may be granted. There are about 1595 women in the ASAPROSAR Rural Credit program. The “failure to payback” the loans is 1%.

ASAPROSAR has other credit programs for persons with some collateral and a history of reliable credit with the ASAPROSAR programs.

Members of the credit programs are able to participate in the other community programs of ASAPROSAR such as visual and general health services and vocational training.
Carlos Aguilar Castaneda and his wife, Eugenia, live with their seven children in Candelaria de la Frontera in El Salvador. He tells the following story:

It was evident, my life was miserable and I found myself on a “broken bench without anything”. But I received a little pregnant goat that later had a little kid. The goat gave me fertilizer for my vegetables, my younger children had better nutrition and fewer parasites. The goat has been a blessing from God. It has helped unite my family and everything revolves around the goat.

Then I had to sell the little kid goat to buy medicine for one of my small sons who was very sick. At the same time my only cow slipped on the hillside and fell into a ravine and died, leaving her two day old calf orphaned, without a mother to give her milk.

My great surprise was that when I put the little calf with our goat. They accepted each other immediately. The calf is eating grass now and growing rapidly but looks to the goat as her real true mother. They are always together and cry out for each other when they are separated. They are part of our family now.

_one cannot help but muse... “This relationship is exemplary of overcoming obstacles of differences. It is a lesson for us Humans to learn!”_
Yesterday it was "jacks"….tomorrow a nurse!
Wendy Medina
By Dot Cole

It has been a joy for me to watch Wendy Medina grow into an accomplished young woman. I first met Wendy in 1996 when she was around 9 years of age. She loved to play “jacks” so we played game after game. My past skills were strongly tested as I fondly recall how Wendy tried to claim the set as her own. Throughout the years her mother has been active with the Barefoot Angels’ program, adding incentive and support for Wendy and her older brother, Gersón. Wendy is an example of the success of the Barefoot Angels Program. She grew up midst the struggles of living and working in the marketplace, but determined to dream her future into reality.

This spring Wendy will be graduating from nursing school. After that she will fulfill her mandatory year as a social intern with the government and then become a graduate nurse. In the meantime Wendy volunteers with the Barefoot Angels and has become one of their fine young well-trained magicians. The latter skills are taught by a professor from Vermont. (Tom Verner, www.magicianswithoutborders.org)

ASAPROSAR and the Barefoot Angels’ program is a beacon of hope for the disadvantaged youth of Santa Ana, El Salvador. The support and caring of dedicated staff provides a positive environment for youth to realize and fulfill their potential in life. Indeed, they are part of the future for El Salvador.

What about Marvin?
Marvin Medina Ramos
By Eloise Clawson

As a shy ten year old Marvin started attending the Barefoot Angels’ program in the afternoon. Each morning he awoke at dawn to begin his work day. It was his job to help his family by selling in the streets as an ambulatory vender of bread and pastries. Marvin traveled long distances, weaving among the buses, in the midst of traffic, and in the congested marketplace. It was an environment of gangs, exploitation, prostitution and drugs.

Three afternoons each week Marvin attended school and the other two days he was able to be a member of the Barefoot Angels’ program. Although small in stature, his energy and participation were contagious.
That was 1989 and so often I thought of Marvin as the years passed. I remember he seemed so vulnerable to his surroundings in spite of his potential for the future. This year (2010) during the recent eye campaign in January, I asked about Marvin. Did anyone know anything about him?

What a surprise when several days later Marvin stopped by the Barefoot Angels’ program! He is now a father and currently works as a mason. Unemployment and underemployment are rampant in El Salvador but he is hopeful the future will have new possibilities for him and his family.

It was a wonderful surprise to see and talk with Marvin twenty-one years later and to see again an example of the fine work of ASAPROSAR and the impact on the lives of high-risk youth and children in the Barefoot Angels’ Program.