

Tragedy and Revival in Honduras

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September 25, 2014



Hurricane Mitch's Knockout Punch

Months after Hurricane Mitch ravaged Honduras, forty volunteers from fifteen nations arrived in the capital city of Tegucigalpa as part of a cross-cultural service project of the Religious Youth Service or more simply, RYS. During the following weeks of service the media regularly covered the story presenting to the public images of young Honduran and international volunteers working side by side. The cooperative efforts of the volunteers served as a source of encouragement to a nation deep in the

process of healing and rebuilding.

Hurricane Mitch was the deadliest Atlantic storm in two centuries. Mitch struck Honduras with heavy winds and dropped a record 75 inches of torrential rains in parts of the countryside. Her November, 1998 departure left behind an epic trail of destruction at a time when the hurricane season had officially ended. In Honduras, over 11,000 men, women and children perished or disappeared as a result of the ravaging storm.

After Mitch, large, steel structures that were once the bridges of Honduras were bent, broken and sunk into submission. Washed away were thousands of small shacks built on the hilly terrain overlooking normally tame rivers. Relentless rains weakened house foundations while mud slides indiscriminately buried homes and entrapped all living creatures. Large parts of the nation's capital went under water when rivers reached levels never imagined by city planners.

The devastation of Hurricane Mitch and the early stages of the rebuilding efforts were part of broadcast news throughout the world drawing volunteers from various nations and organizations. Unfortunately, even after bodies were buried, roads cleared and the rebuilding was well underway, many Hondurans remained in a stupor, a kind of civic state of shock.

North-South Cooperation based in Honduras



The Religious Youth Service (RYS) had already begun working in Honduras two years prior to Hurricane Mitch. This earlier project was part of RYS Founder Dr. Sun Myung Moon's broad initiative to establish better relationships between the people of North and South America. Working with the cooperation of the Honduran Ministry of Social Services an RYS team repaired and expanded the Esteban Mendoza School in La Colonia Kennedy.

In emergency relief it is often after the first wave of responders depart and the media has moved on to the 'next big thing' that local community

members face the long struggle required in rebuilding. RYS prepared to return to Honduras during that stage of the recovery.

Focusing our response on El Sapo

Prior to Hurricane Mitch's arrival the flood prone neighborhood of El Sapo had a reputation for being one of the poorest and the most neglected in the city. Existing community problems were magnified by the impact of the storm. People lost friends and family, jobs disappeared businesses were destroyed, local homes and infrastructure remained heavily damaged. Many vital city services remained cut off and residents had no clear vision or plan on how to turn things around.

Project director, Mario Salinas visited the community to offer the help of RYS but he was met with much

skepticism. One resident pointedly shared, “You know we are so tired of offers like this because nothing happens but disappointment. Maybe your organization is just the same”. It was clear to Mario that something needed to be done to break the daily despair and rekindle community pride.

The RYS service decided to help residents of El Sapo deal with its massive problem of garbage and debris that followed the killer storm. A stream that cut through the community during the deluge had transformed into a destructive river. Many of the local roads were washed out or had large holes filled with debris.

No Garbage Trucks

Without functional roads, garbage trucks refused to enter into parts of El Sapo. Garbage and refuse was being dumped in formally empty lots and piled up in mounds around the stream. By the time our team arrived in June, six months of garbage had accumulated into piles that were a clear public health hazard.

Young volunteers of RYS walked through the community evaluating the size and scope of the dirty job that lay ahead. We realized we had to mentally and physically prepare ourselves to remove the tons and tons of accumulated garbage.

Garbage has a life cycle of its own; the older it gets the fouler and nastier it smells making it harder to move. Freshly tossed garbage soon gets buried under succeeding piles of trash. Like a geometric progression, the amount of bugs and crawling life forms multiplies with age. Remove the top layer of garbage and succeeding layers contain an active world of maggots and bugs.

Pockets of methane gas formed in the lower levels of the oldest piles. By removing the garbage the gas is released with a smell that can literally knock a person out. To prevent overexposure to health hazards, we planned to rotate members of our team so that some would be clearing out garbage while others would be constructing public garbage bins.

“We saw, we smelled, and we conquered”

On our first day at the worksite the staff decided to have everyone work together on the dirty job of cleaning up the garbage. Teaming up together to remove the garbage meant that no one was going to escape; every one of us was going to get down and get dirty. This was a team building challenge that would either make us or break us.



Many squeamish volunteers hesitated to reach into refuse that smelled worse than they thought possible or reach into a stream to pull out slimy containers. One participant challenged a few others to a contest and soon more competitions started; like who could fill the most bags or find the ‘nastiest’ garbage. Laughter resonated with the garbage comparisons.

Starting with the dirtiest job proved to be helpful in creating a team spirit. It was a shared challenge and we gained personal experiences that made for interesting conversations during our breaks. The garbage was a great equalizer allowing us to share in a sense accomplishment. One smiling volunteer shared, “We saw, we smelled and we conquered.”

The need for community support

The work was often tedious, and seemingly endless. El Sapo’s stream was so polluted that daily we pulled out numerous carcasses of decaying birds and animals. The momentous amount of plastic in the area made us wonder why as a society we are so slow switching to biodegradable containers.

The sight of a community member throwing garbage in a field added a sense of futility to our work. It became increasingly clear that no matter how hard we worked we would not accomplish the cleanup without greater community support and a commitment from the government to restart garbage pickups.

Several meetings with community leaders were arranged to discuss community commitment. Removing litter and debris needed to become everyone’s priority and success would be transitory without municipal support.

Mr. Salinas decided to follow up on the mayor’s previous offer to support by requesting that she speak to the volunteers on the Friendship America’s project and meet her constituents. She agreed to come and

timed the visit so that she could see the volunteers at work.

The Mayor Steps In

On her arrival the media was already active filming the work and giving interviews. The mayor moved through a crowd that was filled with mothers, families and the young volunteers. She spoke words of encouragement and listen to the residents. With personal warmth full of genuine concern she made a deep impression.

Moved by what she saw and heard, the mayor announced publicly her pledge to re-establish garbage pickups in El Sapo and resources for the building of more garbage bins.



The mayor's visit and her promises were proof to residents that El Sapo was no longer a forgotten community. Community pride was renewed which inspired many into action. Growing numbers of neighbors gravitated to help with the jobs we faced.

Children clustered around encouraging, laughing, playing and at times working side by side with the volunteers. Their parent's saw to it that we had enough to drink and eat. Families made us feel at home when we needed to use a toilet or take to the shade.

Individuals and then teams of neighborhood men joined us in the construction of the new garbage bins while community organizations made decisions on the locations of the additional garbage pickup areas. The feeling was growing that our team was no longer considered foreign 'guests' but contributing members of the community.

A helping hand can re-awaken a community

With the enhanced cooperation between local organizations and RYS a more realistic approach to the cleanup emerged. Education on the health risks linked to garbage and poor sanitation were begun. Upstream communities were taught the importance of clean water and the reasons for not dumping garbage into the stream.

The Sisters of Charity, a Roman Catholic Order founded by Mother Teresa agreed to follow up on our efforts to support a no litter policy for the community. The Sister's began offering health and education programs to the residents of El Sapo and its neighboring communities, a service that continued well after our departure.

At a decisive point, something can re-awaken the spirit of a devastated community. That awakening may be generated the kindness offered through a stranger's helping hand. An awakening happened in the community of El Sapo. Thanks to the media, the story of the awakening was played out in front of the eyes of a nation looking for reasons to hope.