

ANGELICA

We first met Angelica about 15 years ago as we arrived in the village of Quince de Enero for our annual medical-dental mission to this remote region of northeastern Honduras. We very quickly sensed that things were not “normal” in the village, and our suspicions were quickly realized when we met with “Dionecia”, the matriarchical figure who was always the spokesperson for the village. We learned through Dionecia that Angelica, who was her niece, had been brought to Quince de Enero from her home in another village in anticipation of our arrival to begin that year’s annual medical mission. Angelica, who was 18 at the time, had been taking a medication prescribed at a Honduran hospital in the city of San Pedro Sula, where her mother had taken her after she had fallen ill.

When our medical team first examined her, Angelica was so near death that her parents had already placed a coffin outside Dionecia’s home in the village. Our doctors quickly agreed on a diagnosis of Stephens Johnson Syndrome, a severe allergic reaction that usually results in death. She was in agony from boils on the entire surface of her body, including her head, eyes, face, and mouth. After our doctors stabilized her, they rushed her to the best hospital in San Pedro Sula. Over time, she recovered, but at a price – she was totally blind. During the following year, her mother took her to several hospitals and eye clinics, both in Honduras and in El Salvador. In each place, she was told “Nothing can be done”

By the time that we had met Angelica, we had formed a non-profit organization called “The Mountain of Hope.”, principally to raise the funds needed to construct and operate a modern medical-dental clinic in a remote region of Honduras. We were also able to create a partnership between the Rotary Clubs of Lake Mary, Florida and San Pedro Sula, Honduras, to accomplish several joint projects, including one to bring Angelica to the USA for medical evaluation and corrective surgery.

When Angelica arrived in Florida, she was first hosted by Wilma Medina, a compassionate, fun-loving young woman who spoke flawless Spanish. Wilma quickly came to love Angelica, and she treated and protected her as if she were her own daughter. After several preliminary eye examinations, Angelica was operated on by Dr. Miguel Lugo, who fortunately, also spoke

fluent Spanish. The operation was highly technical, and involved a stem cell assisted transplant of her right cornea. When Angelica's bandages were removed, she could see from her new eye, and she exclaimed, to everyone's delight, "Wilma, you're fat"! Unfortunately, the transplanted cornea did not grow, and Angelica's vision in her right eye deteriorated rapidly.

Angelica remained in Central Florida for almost five months, during which time she underwent two more eye operations, both with the same unfortunate results. She spent seven weeks in our home in Lake Mary, which were challenging times for both Angelica and Bettye. Just imagine being totally blind and living in a strange house, where the residents spoke only haltingly in your own language! In Angelica's room was a ship's clock, which struck the hour and half hour in the traditional navy 8 bell time system. Not being able to understand what time it was so frustrated Angelica, that we removed the clock. We then provided her with a wristwatch that sounded each hour in a conventional manner. Although she spent a fair amount of time watching (or listening) to soap operas on the Spanish language stations, Bettye also taught her to knit, and to play a few tunes on a chord organ. Angelica later presented Bettye with a purse that she had knitted – a gift that Bettye treasures even today. Angelica especially enjoyed our trips to New Smyrna Beach, where she swam confidently both in the pool and the ocean. She is a strong Christian, and comes from a wonderful Christian family. She once addressed the congregation at St. Peter's Church, and provided a marvelous and highly emotional testimony of her appreciation for all that had been done for her.

Angelica has since returned to Florida for two further consultations on possible procedures for restoring her eyesight. Her first such consultation was with a Miami doctor who is recognized as the world's leading expert in the field of cornea transplants into damaged supporting tissue. Although Angelica's own doctor, Dr. Miguel Lugo, and the Miami specialist both agree that she is not presently a good candidate for a successful cornea transplant, both also agree that several new procedures now under study hold good promise for Angelica in the future.

After our first medical-dental mission to Quince de Enero, David, a very talented teenager with the team, made a documentary video of his experiences with the mission group. In the final scene of that video, we see a young Honduran boy handed a flash camera and asked to take a picture of the team before they embark in the vans for departure. Until this point, the

video had been shot only in black and white. Then, at the moment of the flash, as the boy snapped the picture, the video switched to full color, and then just as quickly, the scene returned to the somberness of black and white.

David never shared his rationale for that final scene, but it has always seemed to me that his message was that in the remote villages of Honduras, in spite of beautiful mountains, lush vegetation, and, in particular, the most vivid colors imaginable, life is nonetheless experienced by the isolated villagers in black and white. The extreme poverty, the absence of medical care, the limited education available, the lack of meaningful or challenging employment, and especially the lack of opportunity to break free from the sober surroundings, all make life a dreary, black and white experience. Then, for one brief interval each year, a medical-dental team arrives to bring brightness, joy, and even hope, and during that week, the villagers experience life in full color. Then, when the team departs, life returns to black and white for another year.

Since Angelica views her surroundings “through a lens darkly” if at all, she has not been able to see all the things which most people who visit Florida come here for – the attractions, the theme parks, and the beaches. But she has experienced love in many dimensions, and she had much to tell her family and friends on her return home. In a sense, her being here was like the “snapshot of color” in the video, followed by a return to the reality of life in black and white. We know that whatever life brings her in the future, Angelica will prove a determined witness in the power of the Holy Spirit and the love of Jesus Christ in her own life. Nonetheless, her departure to return to her family was another reminder of the bittersweet nature of our outreach experience in Honduras.

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