



SOLIDARITY BRIDGE

Healing & Empowering the Poor

PACEMAKER MISSION TRIP 2010

TARIJA, BOLIVIA
JULY 10TH – 18TH

A LAUGHING PEOPLE AND AN ASSASSIN BUG

This was our first mission trip to Tarija, a beautiful small city set in the Bolivian wine country on the border with Argentina. The people are lighthearted and unfailingly polite. One of our patients even had a family that laughed all the time with permanent grins on their faces – an extreme rarity among Bolivia’s stoic peoples. The state of Tarija is very progressive for Bolivia and has a free health care system for its poorest residents. This covers basic care and some surgeries – a luxury for the poor in other areas of Bolivia. However, Tarija’s free healthcare does not cover heart surgery of any kind, not even pacemaker surgery.



Most indigenous Bolivians think it is bad form to smile in photos but Mr. Cadena, like the rest of his family, can barely keep from laughing.

Unfortunately, pacemaker surgery is what many people need because a staggering 70% of the people of Tarija are afflicted with Chagas disease. Chagas is a parasitic disease caused by the vinchuca bug. Chagas primarily strikes the poor since vinchucas make their



Justina waits patiently while her mother tells our doctor about her little girl’s heart problems.

homes in substandard housing with adobe walls and thatched roofs. True to its nickname, “assassin bug”, the vinchuca strikes at night and many don’t know they have been infected until years later – often when it is too late for help. One of the worst results of the disease is a slowing and enlarging of the heart. One of our patients had a heart beat of 30 beats a minute – half of what it should be. With a heart this slow, it is difficult to even get out of bed, much less work hard supporting one’s family. The only help to get one’s heart back on track is a pacemaker. Sadly, a pacemaker is too expensive for all but the wealthiest of Bolivians.

THE PACEMAKER MISSION TRIP

Solidarity Bridge was invited to Tarija by the Instituto Cardiovascular de Tarija and the Dante Maldonado Foundation. Dr. Maldonado started the Instituto four years ago after a long successful career in Argentina. The Instituto is the only heart hospital in Tarija and offers everything from open heart surgery to general clinic. Both

Dr. Maldonado and Dr. Ivar Donoso, his right hand man, welcomed us warmly and were great partners in our surgeries.

Our U.S. team included Dr. Mark Ottolin, interventional cardiologist (Wheaton, IL); nurse Cathy Aschbacher, pacemaker specialist (Barrington, IL); Dr. Nancy Streitmatter, cardiologist (Chicago, IL); Raven Hinojosa, videographer (New Orleans, LA), and Christin Hinojosa-Kirschenbaum, Solidarity Bridge's Director of Philanthropy and trip coordinator (Oakland, CA). We were joined by 2 of our Bolivian staff from Cochabamba – Carlos Laserna, Bolivian associate director, and Maria Ines Uriona, social worker. Our local social worker from Tarija, Nancy Ortega, completed the team.



Carlos and Cathy with patient Feliciano Flores after his surgery.

The entire team had an enriching and impactful experience. Since many of our patients were pre-selected by Nancy O. and Dr. Donoso, our first morning was filled with last minute checking of patients followed by our first two surgeries in the afternoon. In all we performed 11 surgeries and saw 46 patients. We also delivered roughly \$550,000 in supplies to be used by the Instituto on an ongoing basis to serve the patients we will send them – estimated at 50 a year. Our pacemaker donations come from Medtronic, our primary partner, and Biotronik. Medtronic is also generously helping to fund our expansion to Tarija, a region in great need.



Raven and Christin with the Cruz family. Jorge was at death's door when we arrived but after his surgery he felt well enough to join us for our closing thanksgiving celebration.

Nancy S. spent her days in clinic checking patients' hearts for both pacemaker and open heart surgery need. In the clinic, she was able to spend one-on-one time with the patients, getting to know their lives and hardships. Raven experienced this even more deeply as she visited two patients' homes to capture their lives on video to share with the larger Solidarity Bridge community. After a particularly hard day visiting with an extremely destitute and sickly family, Raven rallied the team to pool some funds to buy the family some much needed blankets and home supplies. Though this type of help is not the usual work of Solidarity Bridge, the team felt the family's desperation so strongly they couldn't help but make a little gift to ease their hardships.

Mark, Cathy, and Carlos worked in the O.R. with Drs. Maldonado and Donoso. All had much to learn and teach and a strong connection and affection developed between the Bolivian and U.S. teams. They even weathered two long power outages during surgery. In one of these they had to finish the last of the surgery by cell phone illumination. In future trips to Tarija, we will be bringing headlamps!

Our hearty sendoff featured a pig roasted with great gusto by Dr. Maldonado. This was typical of the warm and festive hospitality we found in Tarija. From the most humble patient to

Mark, Cathy, and Carlos worked in the O.R. with Drs.



The O.R. support team.

the most distinguished doctor, we experienced joyfulness and a tremendous gratitude for our work and for God's providence. Dr. Maldonado told us on the last day, "Before you came, I thought I knew everything. Then you came and I had a lot to learn. But the most important thing I learned is about love. Through your service, you have taught me to love and I thank you."

A SINGLE MOTHER'S JOURNEY

The most important part of this report is, of course, the patient's story. When Fidelia first came to the clinic in tears and told us her story, we were reminded of the fragility of life and the Bolivian people's remarkable capacity for resilience and hope. In addition to serving the poorest of the poor, Solidarity Bridge serves those who live on the brink. Fidelia's story is a perfect example of how a middle class family can plunge into destitution when illness strikes. It is also an example of how much our patients teach us and humble us. We return to the U.S. having received just as much as we have given.



Mark with Fidelia after her surgery.

Fidelia's story is heartbreakingly familiar, both in Bolivia and here in the U.S. Fidelia, a single mom, worked hard to provide opportunities for her children. Then illness hit and all her planning and saving became irrelevant.

Fidelia is middle class, works as a pharmacist, and has a daughter in the free public college. She supports her two children and two disabled siblings. Her husband ran off with his young secretary when Fidelia was pregnant with her second child. Still, she was making ends meet and her children were thriving. Then, four years ago, her heart started

giving out. Her doctor told her she had Chagas disease and needed a pacemaker to live. Fidelia makes \$155 a month from her two jobs. A pacemaker surgery costs more than \$8,000. Even as a middle class Bolivian, a surgery to save her life was utterly out of her reach.

Fidelia was devastated and worried about what would become of her children and siblings once she was gone. Then, she found Solidarity Bridge and in July we implanted her with a pacemaker to get her heart back on track. In tears she told us, "I am now convinced that God exists."

Her son, a cherubic 14 year old, stood up during our closing ceremony to tell us, "My mom is both father and mother to us. Without her I could not live." He took a deep breath and gravely continued, "As for me, I am a bad son. But you have convinced me to be a good son because my mother will live."