



Tom with Aurea and a patient

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS WITH A CHIAPAS DENTAL CLINIC. LASC, Feb 13, 2022
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The Latin American Solidarity Committee (LASC) in Buffalo, NY, became a task force of the Western New York Peace Center in the mid -1980's in response to US support of repressive regimes in Central America. In May 2022, LASC will hold an event to celebrate one of its long-term projects, a dental clinic in Chiapas, Mexico, initiated 35 years ago by Dr. Tom Potts, a founding member of LASC.

In 1982, the Mexican government established a dental clinic in Chenalhó, Chiapas, but the clinic was never fully staffed and by 1987 it had ceased functioning. At this point Christine Eber, an anthropologist from Buffalo who was working in Chiapas, invited Dr. Potts to meet with government representatives to initiate dental services under federal sponsorship. He met with Dr. Pascual Jimenez, a dentist employed by the Mexican government, and arranged to work in the clinic in Chenalhó. Tom has returned to Chiapas in month-long visits two to three times a year to serve as a dentist every year since 1987, and this has helped LASC members maintain strong connections with other projects in Chiapas.

Over the years, the clinic has undergone many changes. During the Zapatista uprising in 1994, the Chiapas state police took over the building where the clinic was housed and set up a fortification. Access to the clinic was impossible for a time. After 1994, the ownership of the clinic shifted to the township of Chenalhó, and Tom worked with the authorities there to continue

providing some services, but with limited funds, both the building and equipment were falling into disrepair.

Dr. Pascual Jimenez worked hard to set up a six member local committee of native Tzotzil Maya to administer and sustain the clinic. In 2004 the clinic was rebuilt with a donation of equipment from Mario Violante III, a Niagara County dentist. The equipment was stored and packed by Vince Pellegrino and the Sisters of St. Francis at Stella Niagara, and the supplies were shipped to Chiapas by Pastors for Peace, and installed by Bill Stock of Forestville, NY, who also rebuilt all of the counters and sinks at the clinic.

Bill Jungels made a fifteen minute video about the clinic in 2007

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHfe55jtRqQ&t=6s>

For many years, the Chenalhó committee worked toward providing year-round dental services. They sought help from Mexican health groups to find a local dentist for the community, and to fund transportation, food and dental supplies and materials. In 2010, the dental clinic moved to a new clinic building at a grammar school, which resulted in a substantial improvement in the facilities. The local committee arranged for the new rent-free space. They also installed all the needed water, drainage and electrical connections and moved all the equipment to the new location. LASC continued working with them to upgrade the equipment and facilities, since a new compressor and other dental equipment were needed. A number of loyal supporters made yearly donations to LASC specifically for the dental clinic. Beginning in the summer of 2010, the committee provided Tom with a translator from Mayan to Spanish while he did dentistry at the clinic. The new clinic building is located within a grade school, and Tom was able to do more preventive dentistry and pass out toothbrushes and toothpaste to all of the students.

During Tom's 2015 visit, he saw hundreds of patients for fillings (60%), extractions (30%), and cleanings (10%). He introduced a new program of applying fluoride varnish to all of the children (approximately 200) in the grade school located across the courtyard. He also helped train Aurea Vasquez, a dental assistant, in the technique of varnish application, so that she could apply the varnish at six months intervals. LASC supplied the clinic with the necessary supplies to carry out this program. A reduction of up to 50% in the incidence of dental caries can be expected from this type of intervention at very minimal cost (approximately \$600 per year). Christine Eber, President of the Mayan Educational Foundation (www.mayaedufound.org), also worked with LASC to select and fund an indigenous Mayan (Tzotzil) dental student Ceiba Marisol to study dentistry and return to serve the community. Unfortunately, she eventually had to withdraw from her studies.

In 2016, Tom, already retired in the US, began to think of retiring from some of the dental work in Chenalhó, and the community there gave him a wonderful retirement party with "caldo de pollo" and tortillas. Despite his "retirement," Tom has continued to return every year, and the clinic has continued the fluoride varnish program. In 2018, the Fr. Joseph Bissonette Foundation made a significant contribution that paid for 1,200 dental varnish kits for Chenalhó' clinic and for the Stella Niagara Casa Franciscana clinic in Palenque, Chiapas.

By March 2020, the dental committee had arranged support for a new indigenous dental student, and Tom was able to meet his family in Chenalhó. The pandemic was slow to reach Chenalhó, but when it came it was very deadly for months. Tom continued his work visits anyway, and in December 2020, he had a breakfast meeting with the dental committee and the dental student. José Adalberto Hernández de la Cruz had done very well in his studies, graduated in Nov. 30, 2020, and in January 2021, he started his required one year of social

service at the main dental school at the Chiapas capital, which was good preparation for his planned service at the Chenalhó dental clinic.

Due to the pandemic, the clinic did not open again until December 2021. Afterward, Tom reported on details about the Chenalhó committee's plans to replace some outdated dental equipment for the coming year – a new dental chair, lights and a sterilizer. Dr. Adalberto Hernández de la Cruz will begin work at the clinic in February 2022, and we will need to cover some of his salary. In the clinic's thirty-fifth year, LASC is grateful for the continuing support from Western New York and Chenalhó, and looks forward to a clinic fund-raising celebration this May.