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April 30, 2004

During the month of April, 2004, I was enrolled in Asociación Pop Wuj - Health Services and Medical Care Program. My experience at Asociación Pop Wuj included Spanish classes, educational lectures, volunteer activities, and administration of medical care to the indigenous Mayan community. As I begin my medical residency in emergency medicine, working with diverse patients in a New York City hospital, I believe it is critical to have Spanish-speaking skills, along with an understanding of cultural differences that may exist between myself and my patients.

The blueprint to enhancing my Spanish comprehension consisted of four-hour-long classes, Monday thru Friday, of one-on-one instruction with a local Spanish teacher. We spent time reviewing vocabulary relevant to conversational and medical Spanish, learned the proper grammatical form of many verbs, and even reviewed colloquial Spanish that is frequently spoken in the hospital setting. Working with Patty, my "maestra", advanced my prior rudimentary Spanish to the intermediate level.

In the afternoons, students attended lectures given by local college graduate students that focused on the political and economic situation in Guatemala. The country has a lengthy history of political strife that culminated in a thirty year civil war that recently ended with a peace treaty in the 1990's. The vestiges of the war are apparent in the poor economic conditions that still pervade most Guatemalan citizens, particularly, the "indigena" and certainly influences the health and living conditions of the Guatemalan people.

One of the goals of Asociación Pop Wuj is to provide community service and assistance to the destitute rural communities surrounding the city of Quetzaltenango. A project that I was involved in was the construction of stoves to replace the makeshift ones used by many families. In most rural homes, people cook over an open fire, often built between three stones that balance a pot. By building new, energy-efficient stoves, we not only reduce the economic burden on families but, more importantly, they channel smoke out of their house which greatly reduces lung-related health problems, particularly for women and children who spend much of their time in poorly ventilated kitchens.

As a way to improve healthcare and medical Spanish skills, we also spent time at the Pop-Wuj medical clinic providing services to

the rural communities that, unfortunately, are without access to healthcare and often unaware of proper sanitation and health maintenance practices. Many of my interactions with patients included treatment for intestinal parasites, worms, and sexually transmitted diseases. In addition to dispensing the appropriate medication, much of my interaction involved explaining ways to reduce fecal-oral transmission of organisms, encourage hand washing after working with animals and ways to reduce sexually transmitted diseases.

My experience on this trip was simply amazing and I want to thank those people who made my trip possible: Dr. Rosenthal of the student affairs office, Peggy Harris of the UMDNJ Foundation, and, most of all, Dr. Nagendran for sponsoring the Suku Nagendran Scholarship for International Medical Studies.

Thank you very much