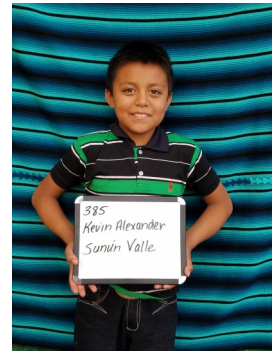


# GIFTS PROGRAM



Child Sponsorship Program

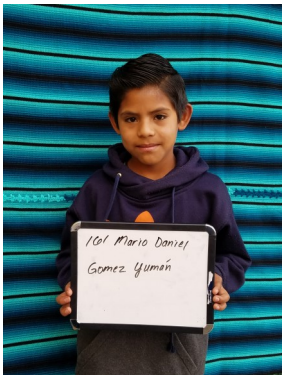
January 2017

## REFLECTIONS

2017 will mark the 7th anniversary of the GIFTS Program. It began after my initial trip to Santa Maria de Jesus in 2009 with the encouragement of one of my dearest friends Lisa Keller who, along with her family, had traveled to Guatemala in years prior. Once in Guatemala, I immediately fell in love with the people in Santa Maria de Jesus and wanted to find a way to serve them more than one week a year, hence the GIFTS Program was born.

I will be the first to admit it has been both rewarding and heartbreaking at the same time. The sheer number of children in the program is often overwhelming. There is generally around 375 children in the program, the number being somewhat fluid. The circumstances of the children often change. Some children have to work to help provide for the families or care for ill family members. Communication with our partner non profit organization has greatly improved over the years. It often was weeks or even a month before we were able to receive a reply. We have technology and internet access to thank for better communication.

“Each one of them is Jesus  
in disguise.”  
-Mother Theresa



I also have access to more individuals who are able to help me overcome the language barrier. Erin Keller, patiently translated many communications for me over the years and I am very grateful for her help. I have the added advantage of my daughter Brennan and friend Emily Keller who spend a great deal of time in Santa Maria. They are able to help bridge the gap. Liz Keller has also helped on numerous occasions. I am truly grateful to have willing and capable Spanish speakers on hand.

There have been times when it all seems too overwhelming. So many children so many problems, and often so little time. Both Barb Holcombe (our fiscal person) and I are volunteers for the program. We receive nothing in return other the satisfaction of helping the God's children who have become like our own. We will continue to work to make life a bit easier for the families and children we love in Santa Maria de Jesus. As always, thank you for your continued support and patience.

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# Who is Who

Sorting out who is who in Santa Maria de Jesus is both simple and complicated. The GIFTS Program is partnered with the First United Methodist Church in Reynoldsville, PA., and is administered by Robin McMillen and Barb Holcombe. This program provides school supplies, pays tuition, and transportation costs for approx. 370 children.

Cosechando Felicidad (Harvesting Happiness) is a non-profit organization established by Brennan McMillen and Emily Keller. The main focus of the Cosechando Felicidad is providing real meals for the elderly and ensuring they have needed medical care. They also help some children with their education.

Moving Mountains Mission, lead by Lisa and Rod Keller, Rick and Robin McMillen and Monty Kunes is an interdenominational team which travels to Santa Maria de Jesus every July. Moving Mountains brings aid to their friends there in the form of new roofs, bunk beds, donations, and vacation Bible school.

Although all three groups are separate, they work closely with each other to provide support for each other and most importantly, serve the people we love in Santa Maria.



## Vacation Bible School

Vacation Bible in Guatemala is quite an experience. Music, Bible stories, crafts and of course a snack are part of the program for hundreds of children. This summer we are fortunate enough to offer a morning and an afternoon Bible School. Children attend school for half days in Santa Maria and often had to be in school during the afternoon when VBS is typically held. Moving Mountains Mission is preparing for hundreds of children to be able to come and learn about God. VBS coordinator, Lisa Keller, does an amazing job of carefully preparing the lessons and crafts for the children. This summer's theme is Our Great Big God. Their crafts are designed to reinforce the Bible Stories so the children are able to share what they have learned with their families. All of the supplies for VBS are brought from the states in luggage. Crafts supplies are packaged in individual bags for ease of distributing to the hundreds of kids. The final day, fiesta day, is complete with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. The VBS team makes an assembly line and soon hundreds of sandwiches are made for the celebration.



These little boys are showing off their sheep crafts made of pool noodles, yarn and felt.



Pictured above are hundreds of children hearing about the word of God.

## Donations

Hundreds of children also receive clothing, shoes, toiletries and other items through the Donation Center.. The Donation Center is organized by GIFTS Program financial coordinator, Barbara Holcombe. Children come to the clinic daily to pick out needed items. Shoes are typically one of the first things to go. Shoes are more expensive and tend to wear out before they are able to be handed down to a younger sibling. In the past, toothbrushes, toothpaste, hair ties and soap have also been distributed. Teenagers and mothers of children in the program often help in the Donation Center.

## Life in Santa Maria, Part 2

In this ongoing section, we hope to bring to you what life is like in this village on the mountain. The people of Santa Maria de Jesus experience many of the same struggles as people do in the United States. Many parents struggle to provide for their children, many experience health issues, some families deal with domestic abuse, and alcoholism is ever present.

Health care in Guatemala presents some challenges. Although going to a national hospital is free of charge, the family is responsible for many things. For example, if a woman has to have a planned C-section, she is responsible for bringing a blood donor with her in addition to water, diapers, medication (they will give the family a list) and whatever supplies will be needed.

Doctor appointments are often not by appointment. Instead, whoever is in need of medical attention must simply stand in line to be seen. Sometimes people have to wait many hours before they are seen.

Even though going to a national hospital is free, many times the medications and supplies are still cost prohibitive for families. Many individuals simply go without adequate health care including children, pregnant mothers and especially the elderly.

Fortunately there are some medical organizations from other countries that travel to Guatemala to provide some surgical interventions as well as general healthcare.



This is 6 month old Alan. He soon will be undergoing surgery for his cleft lip that will be performed by a team of American surgeons who will be coming to Guatemala in May. This adorable little boy had to weigh over 10 lbs before he was eligible for the surgery. He had some difficulty eating, so gaining weight was a little bit of a challenge for him. Please keep him, his family and the team of surgeons in your prayers.

**“The King will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”**

**Matthew 25:40**

## Contact Us

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