

Delivering Free Wheelchairs in El Salvador

The Gift of Mobility

It was the best hug ever. After yet another multi-hour drive, crisscrossing the country of El Salvador, we arrived at the village of Tinteral in the Santa Ana province. Our mission was delivering wheelchairs to the poorest of the poor.

I was the first to bail out of the sweltering, over-crowded van, and was surprised and enchanted to be greeted by a 9 year old bundle of hugs and smiles. Tears welled as I watched Angel, a young member of the Tinteral community, welcome the ten of us, all strangers to him, with his loving hugs.

The remote village of Tinteral, like most of the places we had already visited was extremely poor. Living in America it is hard to imagine this kind of poverty. In Tinteral, as in most of the developing (third world) countries around the world, there is no electricity, dirt “streets” turn to mud during rainy times, water has to be carried from community wells daily and the women cook on primitive gas or wood stoves in “kitchens” with packed dirt for flooring.

People living in these conditions struggle just to have the basic means to survive. The loss of mobility by injury, accident or illness leads to unimaginable consequences for these individuals and their families. Not only are the severely disabled unable to work, but the added burden of caring for them without adequate medical and equipment resources is daunting.

Free Wheelchair Mission, www.freewheelchairmission.org, is an organization dedicated to providing and personally delivering low cost wheelchairs to disabled people around the world. FWM is funded through private and corporate donations (it costs \$71.88 per chair) and to date, over 640,000 have been given to grateful recipients in 84 countries.

Ned and I were fortunate to be able to join this particular distribution in El Salvador and Tinteral was just one of ten communities to which we brought the much needed and appreciated wheelchairs.

Stories from Tinteral

Luis was paralyzed in April of 2011 when he fell out of a tree while harvesting mangos. His family brought him to Tinteral on a bare mattress in the back of an old pickup truck. Luis' mobility since his accident had consisted of being carried by his brother. I was humbled by his brothers' love and total lack of resentment as he gently picked him up off of his mattress yet again. But this time it was to set him down in his new wheelchair. Luis' overwhelming joy was mixed with relief; the chair would significantly lessen the burden on his family.

Margarita smiled with pride as she backed up to her paralyzed sister-in-law, Ana. She bent her knees, reached back to place Ana's arms around her neck, lifted her, and carried her "piggy-back" across the room, demonstrating how she had been carrying Ana (now 46) since she became paralyzed from seizures at 26 years old. With unbelievable good humor, Margarita told me they fell a lot, especially on stairs. I was again moved to tears. Ana, now settled in her wheelchair had been completely unresponsive, and I assumed she was mentally disabled. I was wrong. Margarita said, "She knows," and as I put my hand on Ana's arm she "woke up." She had difficulty speaking, but told me how happy she was. She also said Ana was her sister-in-law, but that she felt more like a mother.

Soyla had been born with defects. She was about 3 ½ ft. tall, had tiny, under-developed arms and legs, only two fingers on one hand, clubbed feet with only two toes (in the wrong places) and the most beautiful smile I have ever seen. Soyla came to the distribution in an attractive dress with her hair and makeup done, and her cheerful optimism was infectious. She was able to move herself from her chair to her new wheelchair with unselfconscious difficulty, and my admiration for her grew as she told us she was married, had a child, worked as a seamstress, did embroidery, and took in washing and ironing. It was hard to imagine how she could do all of that with her deformities, but the more time we spent with her the less we saw the defects. Soyla was a loving, competent, confident human being. Her new wheelchair did not give her dignity, it added to it.

Soyla also had a generous spirit. It turned out that there was one too few wheelchairs for the eleven people who needed one. It was heart-wrenching to watch the disappointment fall over the face of the woman who did not receive one. Soyla insisted on giving up her chair for the other woman and her generosity spurred us to make an additional trip back to Tinteral the next day to make sure Soyla got a replacement. We didn't mind, we got to have more hugs and smiles from Soyla.

We got a chance later to talk to our one-boy welcoming committee, Angel. With an impish grin, he told us that his mother and one brother had died years before and that his father was raising the three children. In spite of the family hardships, Angel was well raised, happy and confident. This was obviously a village of people who took care of one another.

We delivered wheelchairs to many other towns and villages that week. Most were down-trodden and sad, some were quiet and resigned, but all were grateful in their own way. Tinteral was our favorite. The people put on a little ceremony for us with singing, prayers and much thanksgiving. The sense of community and care for one another was greater than I have experienced here at home, and their pride and joy in the face of poverty were humbling. We might be richer, but I felt poor by comparison.