

Shoes, Supplies, and Overwhelming Support: The Story of Dr. Amanda Richline's Guatemala Trip

Guatemala is a country with a population of over 40% indigenous Mayan people, and a government so unethical that its leaders are currently facing a multi-million dollar corruption investigation. Needless to say, poverty is widespread...and so is disease.

Every day is a struggle for these kind, peaceful, and gentle people. Unsanitary conditions cause illness and infection, and healthcare is far out of reach, with no means to get to a hospital much less pay for treatment.

It is because of this that the organization, Mayan Families was created. Their mission is to not only provide aid to the communities struggling to survive throughout the Lake Atitlan region of rural Guatemala, but also to stimulate progress through education, training, sponsorships, and health initiatives.

Dr. Amanda Richline got involved with this group after local church members and patients encouraged her, knowing the doctor's love of helping others in need. She accepted an invitation to travel on a medical mission, but in typical fashion, made the trip much more than a means of providing health care.

Immediately Dr. Richline began gathering donations of shoes, reaching out to her patients and the community who responded with overwhelming support. Church members even wrote a letter to the school district initiating a contest for kids who brought in the most shoes to receive a pizza party.

Inspired and humbled by such generosity, when the collection reached 500 pairs, Dr. Richline matched it. Still the donations continued to pour in. By the time the doctor, her assistant Sarah, and members of the United Presbyterian Church in Belvidere, NJ started packing the shoes and preparing them to ship, the collection had grown to nearly 1600. They filled 15 boxes, 3 cubic yards each, but just as they were about to send them off to Guatemala, the shipping plans fell through. After a long and tedious 6 month process, Dr. Richline wasn't about to let anything get in the way—not even an international shipping problem! She quickly made arrangements and along with an added contribution from the church, paid the hefty price tag to get the boxes picked up and delivered prior to her arrival—but there was another glitch.

A single driver showed up to pick up the boxes. Upon seeing them, he thought it an impossible task to load the large and heavy cargo. Little did he know that impossible is not in Dr. Richline's vocabulary! She promptly promised him that not only could it be done, it would be done and with that she began helping the driver herself. Together they loaded the truck, and off it went full of shoes, as well as hundreds of personal hygiene products Dr. Richline collected as well, knowing that simple everyday items such as soap and toothpaste were luxuries to the Mayan people. She even included over \$3000 in orthotics for the children.

When the time grew near for Dr. Richline herself to head to Guatemala, she learned that she was the only doctor assigned to the mission. Feeling she could only do so much alone, she offered to sponsor her assistant, Sarah, as well as a neurosurgeon friend from previous mission trips, Dr. Peter, so that the team could help as many people as possible.

Dr. Richline's husband Ted of Ted's Remodeling Concepts also came along on the trip, taking time off to help build, repair, and reinforce Guatemalan structures, as well as help educate local workers on construction techniques in hopes that they could utilize these skills for continued improvements in the future.

Once the team arrived, Dr. Richline, Dr. Peter, and Sarah spent long days in the medical clinic treating and educating an endless number of patients, and of course dispensing much needed shoes. The suffering was heart wrenching, with numerous cases of GERD, gastrointestinal disease, fatigue, malaise, sepsis, and electrical burns. Bursitis and arthritis are common due to overused joints with little time to rest since the people must work to survive. The shoes would be of great help, but many people were in need of braces and splints— ordinary items we can easily find at any drugstore but were unheard of in this rural, poverty-stricken country. Dr. Richline showed patients how to make these items out of rope and cloth, and made a mental note to be sure to include them on her next visit.

Bearing witness to such heartache was difficult to say the least. One day Dr. Richline came across a 6 year old boy with a virus attacking his nervous system. What could have otherwise been easily treated with medication had progressed to the point of affecting his muscles, inhibiting him from standing and walking. Hospitalization was necessary if there was any hope for survival, but his family had no transportation or money. Mayan Families and Dr. Richline stepped in, arranging transportation and paying for treatment. In hopes of his survival, Dr. Richline decided to sponsor the child, which entails donating \$1 a day—amazingly going a long way for food, clothing, transportation, access to the medical clinic, and more.

While the days were physically and mentally exhausting, as an avid animal activist, Dr. Amanda Richline was determined to help the suffering and starving animals of Guatemala as well, so she spent her evenings with Hope for the Animals, an affiliate of the Mayan Families organization. Prior to her trip, the doctor didn't just collect shoes to help the Mayan people, she gathered donations to help the animals too, bringing with her three 70 pound suitcases full of food and supplies.

Dr. Richline was so touched by three dogs in particular who were suffering and emaciated, that with the gracious help of Hope for the Animals, she made arrangements to fly the dogs back to the United States to be with her.

In her final days in Guatemala, Dr. Richline was honored and privileged to meet Dr. William Boegel and his wife Diane who had years ago felt a strong calling to help the Mayan people as well. Giving up a successful and bountiful career and lifestyle, the couple left it all behind to purchase a 59-acre farm high in the mountains of Lake Atitlan to open a refuge for the impoverished children there. Called the Opal House, this beautiful place offers shelter as well as physical, spiritual, and educational nourishment to children in need. It is the epitome of peace, love, and kindness—a perfect reflection of yet another Dr. Amanda Richline selfless mission.

If you would like to assist Dr. Richline in helping the people of Guatemala, please visit opalhouseguatemala.com, or consider donating to Mayan Families and Hope for the Animals at mayanfamilies.org.