Racing to Saving Lives in Central America

A discarded tour bus that once carried USF engineering students has been transformed into a mobile medical clinic in Belize.

She was 25 years old and it was thought that her best years, were behind her. The faithful bus that belonged to the Society of Automotive Engineers student group, the USF Racing team to be exact, used to transport students and a Formula-style race car to competitions throughout the United States, was in bad shape and in need of repair. The decision was made to dispose of her.

But fate intervened and soon the bus was about to get a second chance when the right group of people got together and transformed the old bus for a new purpose – bringing lifesaving medical services to the people of Belize.

Since 1995, Florida Hospital has supported the La Loma Luz Hospital in Santa Elena, Belize, located in the Cayo District near the Guatemalan border. Dr. Peter Bath, Vice President of Ministry and Missions at Florida Hospital – West Florida Region, made frequent medical missions to La Loma Luz using an old pickup truck loaded with clinical personnel and supplies to visit the local residents who didn’t have transportation to the hospital.

“Those once-a-year visits were often the only time residents located even 10 miles away from Santa Elena ever saw a doctor,” said Dr. Bath. “When someone received something as small as a new toothbrush it was like Christmas.” Before the bus, when someone got sick, the only alternative to self-medication was a 10-mile walk into Santa Elena.

John Pritchard, founder of Venture Medical in Tampa, acquired the old USF Racing bus. “I wasn’t quite sure what I was going to do with it,” he said. Pritchard’s company supplies medical equipment to Florida Hospital Tampa and other healthcare companies.

During one of Bath’s medical missions to La Loma Luz, Pritchard and employee Mr. Norman Ramirez, a biomedical engineer, accompanied him to repair and install medical equipment at the Belizean hospital. After witnessing Peter’s old truck making those desperate emergency trips taking patients to the hospital Pritchard became inspired.

“One day Peter said that utilizing the pickup truck was so inefficient. What they really needed was a mobile medical clinic,” Pritchard said. “And then it all clicked in my head and came together – the USF bus.” In addition to the supplies Florida Hospital provided, Pritchard’s company donated $7,000 worth of equipment.

Once back in Tampa, Pritchard volunteered his time for a year to rework and configure the bus into an examination clinic at the direction of Dr. Marian Menezes, a fellow missionary to La Loma Luz. At Florida Hospital the team packed up 1,500 pounds of medical supplies and equipment and loaded it into the
bus. The bus then set off on a 12 day 2,742 mile journey from Tampa through the Mexican and Belizean borders all the way to Santa Elena, Belize.

Bath says the bus is serving exactly as planned. The first week the bus was in use, doctors saw 400 plus patients in communities surrounding Santa Elena, including a 12-day-old infant girl with severely infected eyes. The bus enabled doctors to see the baby in time to treat the infection before it took her vision.

“A child’s eyesight saved - that’s something you just can’t put a dollar value on,” said Bath.

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