



by Dr. Dagoberto Mejía López Coordinator AMDA Honduras

DEFINING THE MEANING OF

CANCER

My father used to tell me that “no matter how small, each step you take will get you closer to the finishing line.” With this in mind, I started pursuing this project, which led me to an incredible place in Honduras called El Paraiso.

Without a doubt El Paraiso is one of a kind, located in the heart of the southeastern region of Honduras and corresponding to one of its eighteen departments, mountainous landscapes surround its valleys which I should say are among its many charms, offering a variety of dramatic changes that to my belief is one feature that outstands the most.

When traveling through El Paraiso you can find yourself immerse between pine trees under a cloak of cool mist and suddenly enter into a calid and vast valley that impregnates your senses with bright greens and yellows, the perfumed brise of welcoming flowers in the summer reminds us of how fast time goes by, although, El Paraiso has many wonders, for me what makes the journey special is always its people.

Cancer is, for many, an abhorrent word one they'd rather ignore. But I believe there's so much that needs to be addressed, and it should no longer be pushed aside. Throughout this journey, we've met incredible people who focus on the positive impact of confronting this illness, shifting the perception from fear to hope. They have shown us how vital it is to support each other, to be compassionate, kind, loving, and present. I've come to understand that cancer is not just a word marked by negativity it's also the possibility to reveal the best in us.



A young boy runs down the road that leads to a medical brigade in El Guano village



Dr. Marissa González after a long and weary medical brigade.

KINDNESS

I've seen also that sometimes we are so absorbed by many things that we miss one of God's wonderful gifts given to us, and that is kindness, mostly expressed in different ways, for example; to give a comforting word or, a hug, or just being silent, I've seen this in much of the doctors that we've been fortunate to work with, and I have realized this is what gives purpose and sustenance to our work. I strongly believe that kindness should be carefully harvest in our hearts that we may share it abundantly.

It also comes to my surprise that it has been almost three years since we started changing the lives of many, because together we have, and still are overcoming the challenges encountered along the way. It's worth mentioning that among them was the perception that people had about "Cancer", which for many implied sorrows, pain, death, but most importantly defeat; however, in the last couple of years, I have witnessed how this has started to change.

When we first introduced the possibility to receive not only a diagnosis but also to treat harmful cervical illnesses on site, most patients were undoubtedly surprised, and doctors were hopeful for future outcomes. Patients coming to understand how a simple inspection lasting less than 20 minutes could change their whole life was revealing to the whole community, and for the first time were given relief from a long-carrying burden.

CHALLENGES FACED TOGETHER

As we developed this intricate awareness campaign against breast and cervical cancer, we soon realized that the communities ignored so much about the risks of not having routine screening, and even worse, that most didn't have access to this screening.

Amid mild opposition, mostly due to ignorance and cultural affairs, we started educating and screening for cervical cancer, firstly among urban living patients, most of whom had never been screened before using the newly introduced Visual Inspection method or had any other screening (like the Pap smear) in the last five years or more.

It was no surprise to see the positive cases abruptly adding up, "positive" meaning that during examination, a lesion was shown in their cervix (the uterus's most distal part). Some were mild and could be treated onsite; others were not so fortunate. Such cases remind me of how important it is to continue our job and how blessed we are to provide it.

When we first introduced the treatment for low-grade cervical lesions using a thermal ablation method, I witnessed the excitement in the faces of colleagues who, for many years, could not grant relief to a well-known patient whom they had managed for many years with no positive outcome and who could now be cured. It was wonderful to them to see that this method not only worked but was also very noble.



A Patient peeks through the window of an overcrowded house during an informative briefing before the medical brigade

NEW CHALLENGES



Dr. Gloria Rivera at her office in Linaca village health center

I am increasingly aware that every step we take is a step forward in the fight against cancer, and that every patient screened or treated truly makes a difference. It is heartwarming to witness favorable outcomes, and inspiring to know that a wonderful group of people is leading the way not only clinically, but with deep humanity. All I can say is that I feel fortunate to work alongside such dedicated and compassionate people.

New challenges await this journey, but we can count on each other to overcome them and that we stand on the shoulders of brave men and women who paved the path we now follow and thus, we are bound by duty to fight for those in need. I am aware that Cancer has a new meaning to me and for many it is no more of despair or fear, but of hope and confidence, not on themselves alone but on each other.

“New challenges await this journey, but we can count on each other to overcome them”



Dr. Marissa Gonzales and Nurse Ena Rodriguez at El Guano village health center