

House of Hope Blog

Personal Stories | January 30, 2014

A daily blog from Dr. Autumn Dawn Galbreath's trip to **House of Hope** in Nicaragua to treat victims of human trafficking.

Day 1 - 1/8/11

Left home at 4:30 am to fly to Miami for 7 hour layover! Met up with half of team there. All got to Managua by 9 pm and had a wonderful dinner at the beautiful Best Western. It's a good team and we're off to a good start.

Day 2 - 1/9/11

We attended English-speaking church @ International Christian Fellowship. Many people of many nationalities worshipping the Lord together. I think this is what heaven will be like! It meets at the Nicaragua Christian School, a k through 12 English school of 300 students. Then to the Quinta Primavera - a Mennonite guest house where we'll stay for the week in dorm-style rooms of 6.

April came from House of Hope - she is the founder of House of Hope (HoH) & is an American missionary. She told us a little about House of Hope (HoH) and then told us that "first, we're going to see the brothels, and then we'll have lunch." The paradox of seeing the lives of these women and then carrying on our own lives at lunch seemed pretty surreal!

We learned that HoH is a vocational rehab ctr for women/girls coming out of prostitution. The youngest girl living there now is 9. The youngest they have ever had was 5. They also have 400 women per week coming for rehab in their non- residential program. There are 70 women/girls in residential program.

Oscar came from HoH to take us through some brothels. Oscar is the on-site director (and something of a security guard) at HoH. He is an ex-Sandinista military man who has come to Christ and his life calling is to evangelize in the brothels and rescue women from sexual slavery. He even conducts raids on child brothels and rescues young children from prostitution. He goes into the brothel with a group and while the group holds the pimp, Oscar breaks down door after door until he finds the girl(s) and he takes them away to House of Hope. Though child prostitution is illegal here, the government officials get kick-backs from the pimps and the police officers are the best customers in the child brothels, so there is no enforcement of the laws against child prostitution. Child prostitution is dramatically more profitable (\$50-\$100 per trick compared to \$1.50 starting pay for the women on the streets) so the clientele are wealthy & powerful and rescuing the girls is a dangerous business. Thankfully we cannot visit the child brothels since they are highly secretive. I think that would have been more than I could handle....it was pushing my limits as it was!

To go to the brothels, we drove in a bus from the lovely suburban guest home where we're staying through the city. We watched the surroundings get seedier and seedier and the stench of trash and sewage was almost unbearable. We got out at each of three different brothels and Oscar and April just walked right up to the ladies sitting on their chairs in front. ("Sitting on a chair" is the Nicaraguan

euphemism for "Working the street corner"). They knew many of the ladies from previous trips to the brothels and they talked with them freely...."Have you thought about changing your life? God loves you and we want to help you. There can be more for you than this." Many of the women looked so young - teenagers at best - sitting on their chairs heavily made up and provocatively dressed with condoms sticking out of their bras. The whole thing was heart-breaking - but the most terrible part was seeing the prostitutes carrying their babies and toddlers around the brothels. Apparently their kids are in the rooms with them all night while they work because they don't have anywhere else to take them. In fact, many of the younger (teenage) prostitutes are pimped by their own mothers & work the street corners alongside their mothers.

The brothels themselves are really long hallways that open to the outside. Off the hallway there are small stalls about the size of a handicapped bathroom stall at home. Each stall is furnished with a cot. No electricity, no plumbing, no sheets. There was nothing inviting about the whole place - that's for sure!

After we saw more than I ever thought I would see in this life and we drove away on the bus, there was a large billboard advertising coffee in the sky just about the "Cat's Tail District" (where the brothels are). It said, in incredible irony, "Sharing the joy of being Nicaraguan." Apparently they're not sharing with everyone!

Seeing the sites of the life of a prostitute and hearing the stories of rescue hit me in a really deep way. Often when a woman wants to leave her pimp, she can't get away because the pimp has set her up to have a debt to him that she can never actually pay off. In these situations, the HoH people will often "redeem" the women from prostitution by paying their debt to the pimp, freeing the woman to walk away from her bondage. It's impossible not to see the illustration of my heart & life - created to be God's spotless treasure, the sin in my heart created a life of refuse and stench....a life of "watch where you step and try to keep the *?#! off of you." Then God busted the doors down, searched the house, looked for me, and found me. He redeemed me - paying the debt that I had accumulated - a debt that I could never work off but that He could easily pay out of his unlimited funds. And He brought me to a place of shelter - a safe place where He taught me how to live a new life....a life that He desired for me and a joy that He gave to me.

I know that I so often take my freedom from bondage for granted. I forget the stench and the refuse of life before I was redeemed. But I am willing to bet these ladies never do. She who has been forgiven much loves much, as Jesus once said.

Day 2 - 1/9/11 part B

We ended the day at HoH today. We met the girls and women who live there. The girls are precious and want to be normal kids. But they are also sexualized, heavily made-up, jaded, and tragically worldly wise. They are so desperate to be loved, and so happy to interact with us.

There were 2 girls who summed up the whole mission of HoH: Sandra is the older sister, age 15. Delma is the younger sister, age 13. They came from the same home, same background, and the same mother who prostituted them both. The difference is this: Delma has been at HoH for a year and Sandra just arrived today. Delma was laughing, teasing her friends, talking with us, running around, playing games. Sandra looked like walking dead - totally flat affect and nearly unresponsive to us. When we asked Delma why she was so joyful, she said "Because I know Jesus Christ and I live here

where Miss April teaches us God's Word." We asked Sandra why she decided to come to HoH, and she said "Because I saw how happy my sister is here." A testimony to HoH and how the Lord is using it to change lives here.

Day 3 - 1/10/11

We awoke this morning to big news - Don Thompson was asleep in his room all night and his room was broken into and EVERYTHING was stolen except one outfit. They left him a set of scrubs, underwear, socks, shoes and his wedding ring - which was really kind of them considering that they took all his money, his phone, his computer, his watch, all his other clothes and his passport. They took EVERYTHING except one day's set of clothes so he didn't have to come out of his room in pajamas. We had been told that where we were staying was a safe place and that we just needed to use "reasonable caution." So this was a wake-up call for us!

Today was our first day of clinic - we saw about 200 patients altogether. I think I saw 25-30 but I lost count along the way. Of course, Don was at the Embassy the better part of the day trying to deal with the ramifications of the theft. So Gloria took over as leader for the day. The flow was great and we got a lot done. We did labs, Pap smears, treated parasites, gave out vitamins....It was busy and tiring. At lunch every clinic day they have HoH residents giving their testimonies. It was interesting and celebratory to hear how God has delivered these girls from such evil and bondage. But it was also intense - and it meant that we went from intense clinic time to intense lunch hour back to intense clinic time. Now I'm gratefully sitting doing nothing!

We had an amazing dinner at the guest house - their security may be lacking, but boy can they cook! And then we had a team meeting and debriefing, and now we're at the internet cafe emailing and calling home!! I'm so excited!!

Day 4 - 1/11/11

Today was our second day of clinic. They warned us over and over that today would be the worst day because they were bringing up big buses of women who are still actively working on the streets. They said we would see our largest number of patients today and that the patients would be pushy, in-your-face and trying to pickpocket us. But, despite the dire warnings, it was a great day. We saw about the same number of patients as yesterday and no one stole anything from us. I worked in gynecology today rather than in the primary care clinic. Since every woman needs a Pap and every woman has STD symptoms (or pretty much every one) gynecology got way behind. So I worked at the front of their area doing all the intake and addressing the headaches, backaches, urinary tract infections, coughs and colds while they were waiting in line for the Gynecologists. I actually liked this role a lot. The neatest thing that happened today involved one of the girls at HoH. She is a recent arrival - a couple of months ago. She has been "frozen" since she arrived, not talking or sharing with anyone. She has been quiet and completely shut down. Yesterday I was supervising our medical student....she was taking a long time with every patient, talking at length through her translator and really getting to know every patient. In the afternoon, she spent almost the entire afternoon with this HoH girl. She's 14 years old and came to see the doctor for a cough. But as the medical student talked to her she found out about all the terrible things that have been done to her and she found out that the girl was suicidal. She had the pastor on our team meet with her, talk to her and pray with her. We started her on anti-depressants. Between several people, several hours of conversation and prayer with her took place.

This morning in the HoH church service, this same frozen, shut down girl went forward for prayer and prayed to accept Christ. It's amazing to see God's hand reach down into the middle of this mess and accomplish victory in the life of His precious child. The hardest part of the day each clinic day is the lunchtime testimonies from the girls and women. Today we heard from an 11 year old who was rescued from one of the child brothels in a raid. April told us her story before the little girl came in - they don't ask the kids to tell their stories to the group because it's just too hard for them. But then the little girl came in to say hi to us. April translated for her and asked her if there was anything she wanted to say to all of us. She said, "Welcome to House of Hope. We are so thankful that you are here to help us. And please forgive us if we have done anything bad." And of all of the things we've seen and heard this week, this was the thing that punched me in the gut. I started crying and I was pretty sure I wasn't ever going to stop.

Day 5 - 1/12/11

Clinic was slow today. We saw some patients in the morning and then we played with the girls and took pictures all afternoon. There was an opportunity to sign up for sponsorships - each girl has a sponsor like a Compassion child sponsorship program. I signed up to sponsor two sisters, Delma and Sandra - the same 2 sisters I sat with at dinner Sunday night. One has been here a while and one just arrived on Sunday. I wanted to sign up to sponsor all of them. Actually I want to take them all home with me and give them a different life.....When Sandra and Delma found out that I was going to be their "madrina" (godmother/sponsor), they came to hug me and tell me how much they loved me. They wanted to write their names on my hand so I would remember them. Sandra wrote "Sandra Lucia Rivas Soriano" in the Latin style of first name, middle name, father's last name, then mother's last name. Delma wrote "Delma Elizabeth Soriano." Without thinking, I asked her why she doesn't use the "Rivas" name, too. She told me that she has a different father from Sandra. I asked if she ever thought about using his name and Sandra answered for her - "We don't know his last name. We just know his name was Hector." Is it any wonder that these girls have crises of identity and can't figure out how to relate to men?

The patients came by bus from Managua today, driven by Oscar, the HoH director who does the raids on the brothels. The people from the first bus were almost all seen and the second bus load had not yet arrived. I asked April where the rest of the patients were and she said, "Oscar's running a little late with the second bus load because between the first and second bus, he had to go get a 7 and 9 year old from a brothel and bring them back." The way these people live their lives and what they consider normal is simply astounding.

Oscar was the lunchtime testimony today. He told an unbelievable story. April warned us that while all the girls' stories are rated R for sexual content, Oscar's is rated R for violence - and she wasn't kidding! His story started with seeing his older brother (a Sandinista guerilla) burned alive by the Samosan army, led through years of violence and hatred as a Sandinista guerilla himself, and ended with him drunk and high on cocaine at a church service where he went accidentally, stayed unwillingly and ended up accepting Christ as his Savior. After that night he never touched cocaine or alcohol again and he began to work as a caretaker at the church. Through his job there he met April and learned about her ministry to prostitutes (before HoH was built). He told one of the prostitutes who came to the meeting one day that God wanted her to leave her life of prostitution behind - to

which she replied, "I know, but God also wants me to feed my kids and I don't have any other way to do that." He realized that the ultimate answer to the problem was evangelism PLUS teaching the ladies life skills by which they could better their lives and those of their families. He started working with April, and ultimately HoH was born. And now this huge man who was trained with Castro's army in Cuba and who fought in guerilla warfare with the group that is now in power in Nicaragua has the bulk, the training and the government connections that he uses to rescue and redeem women and girls from a life of slavery and prostitution. It's weird - we throw around Romans 8:28 all the time, about God working all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. But I don't think I would have really believed that God could use the kind hatred and bloodshed that Oscar described for any kind of good. But here he is - expertly trained in clandestine operations and violence, and on good terms with his "friends" who he used to fight alongside and who are now leaders in the Sandinista government - using all the baggage of his past to serve God for the good of these women and girls. I think the only conversion I've heard before that was this dramatic was Paul's 2000+ years ago!

Tonight at our team meeting another woman in our group shared about her history of sexual abuse. It's so easy to think this is someone else's problem and my country/race/class/family/etc isn't affected by it. But the truth is that sexual abuse is being perpetrated on children every day in every country and among people of every race and class. I think it's the deepest perversion of God's design and creation - the ultimate and most base way that a person with power and strength can victimize someone else. And the damage it inflicts is soul-damage that eats away at the very personhood of the victim. Over and over again as I have heard stories of sexual abuse, be they the stories of prostitutes in Nicaragua or of friends in the States, I am struck by how similar is the impact on the person. They may deal with it differently depending on their culture and socioeconomic status....I've heard 2 of our team members talk to these girls about their own pasts and say, "I KNOW how you feel. I didn't sell my body, but I gave it away. I gave it away for some of the same reasons you sell yours - because I thought it was damaged and worthless. I thought I didn't deserve any better." The impact in their souls is the same. And until God heals the soul, no amount of education or financial/social support will ever truly help.

Day 6 - 1/13/11

We're on the bus on the way to our morning clinics and I already have a full journal entry to write - just from breakfast and morning devotions! At breakfast I sat by a team member and started asking her about her story.....and it's quite a story. Here's a suburbanite PA from New York who looks and acts like me (except for the New York accent!), but she opens her mouth to answer my question, and out comes a story of a fatherless upbringing in the Bronx by a mentally ill mother, a story of gangs and drugs and violence, and a story of the redemptive love of Christ reaching down into that world and supernaturally delivering her. And here she is, showing her gratitude for the redemption she experienced by turning to others and extending God's love to them.

From that light breakfast conversation, we went to team devotions. One of the 3 men on our team (there is our new/substitute team leader and 2 husbands of women who are here) wanted to play a song before devotions got started.

Beautiful (Mercy Me)

Days will come when you won't have the strength. When all you hear is you're not worth anything.

Wondering if you ever could be loved. And if they truly saw your heart they'd see too much.

You're beautiful

You're beautiful

You were made for so much more than all of this.

You're beautiful

You're beautiful

You are treasured. You are sacred.

You are His.

You're beautiful

Praying that you have the heart to fight. Cause you are more than what is hurting you tonight. For all the lies you've held inside so long. They are nothing in the shadow of the cross.

You're beautiful

You're beautiful

You are made for so much more than all of this

You're beautiful

You're beautiful

You are treasured. You are sacred. You are His.

You're beautiful

Before you ever took a breath. Long before the world began. Of all the wonders He possessed, there was one more precious. Of all the earth and skies above, you're the one He madly loves enough to die.

You're beautiful

You're beautiful

In His eyes.....

This is a song I've often heard on the radio at home. And when I hear it, my eyes get misty because I don't truly see myself as beautiful - I don't receive the truth that I am treasured, sacred, loved. I know that God created us as women with a deep longing to be beautiful and to be loved - we so desperately want that. We first look to our fathers, and to our husbands, and so often to many other men, just hoping that one of them one day will pour into us the love we need to fill the craving void inside. But so often they don't and so many of them can't, even if they knew and even if they wanted to. And of course, even those who have the desire and whose own emotional health is intact and gives them the ability to love us - even they can never truly satisfy that intense longing. They can only reflect the True Love that we need.

But I look at myself - reared in a Christian home, active in the church, living a comfortable American doctor's life with my husband and 3 children. And yet I know that I, too, long for that void to be filled. I long so deeply to be beautiful, treasured, sacred. And then I look at these girls - reared on the streets watching their mothers prostitute themselves to be able to buy food for their children, ashamed to attend church and be judged, living in a cardboard and tin shack in the market without their fathers (if they even know who they are), being sold by their own mothers and siblings. And I can't imagine the depth of the void. I think it must be a black hole that swallows any love that comes its way and remains just as empty as it started. When the song played the words "you are more than what is hurting you tonight" I just started to weep. Lord, how can we even begin to show these girls the truth

of these words when we know how many of them will be hurt again tonight, and tomorrow night, and.....

It has also really hit home with me over these days how miserable this life is for these women. They don't do this because they want to. They usually first do it against their will, because they are forced. And they continue doing it because they have to feed their children. Over and over this week I have heard women say, "I know this lifestyle is bad/dangerous/wrong/etc, but my children are starving." And I realize that for many of these women this lifestyle is a sacrifice. I wonder what I would do if my children were truly starving. Of course, this lifestyle is also a trap - some of them are literally in bondage as sex slaves, many of them are in financial bondage because of the debts they owe to their pimps, all of them are in social bondage because they have no other skills and no way to make money and all of them are in spiritual bondage living in the middle of evil and not understanding how God could possibly care about them given the realities of their lives. It's very quickly clear that no amount of thought, policy-making, or financial aid can break the chains. Only the Lord can break the chains and set these captives free. Only His love and His redemption can break the terrible cycle. Only He can make streams in this desert and do something new in these lives. We have so little to offer them despite the 4 or 5 suitcases apiece that we brought filled with supplies, clothes....The one thing we have to offer would have come with us no matter how much of our luggage didn't make it. That, of course, is God - His love and His power are the only solution. So we bring both nothing and everything here and we offer them both to Him for His use and for His purposes here.

All these thoughts and discussions took place before our 7:30 devotional! At the 7:30 devotional a team member talked about the Israelites leaving Egypt with all the gold and treasures - and then ultimately (after a few missteps) they used that gold and those treasures to build the temple in the Promised Land. They used their suffering in slavery in Egypt to offer back to God for His glory. That made me reflect in yet another way on how God can use the terrible tragedies and injustices in the lives of these girls for His glory in time to come.

Day 6 part B - 1/13/11

I did a lot of non-medical things today - planning, translating, working with the kids, helping with a domestic abuse workshop that one of our team members gave.....Fun and tiring but in a different way from previous days. The rest of the team was seeing patients. There were just other things I needed to focus on.

Lunch testimonies were intense and hard to listen to again.....the story of one of the girls Oscar has rescued from a child brothel. She is from a mountain village and her friend's boyfriend was going to take her and her friend to visit Managua. But instead he took them to a truck where they were held at gunpoint all the way to Managua and were sold for \$7.50 each to a child brothel as sex slaves. She tells a pretty exciting story of Brother Oscar running down the hall of the brothel kicking down doors until he found her and her friend and took them to HoH. Her friend went home from HoH to her parents but April tells us that Yosie didn't want to go back to her parents, saying "they'll just sell me again." No one knows for sure what part her parents played in the kidnapping, but apparently the girl believes that they were paid to help arrange it.

We also heard from one of the moms who lives here with her daughters. It was a story of childhood abuse, leading to early pregnancy, leading to living in the street with starving children, leading to

prostitution. The victory of this story is that HoH intervened in the cycle before either of the girls entered prostitution. They are doing well in school and have big dreams for their lives.....which is exactly why HoH exists, why we are here, and what God desires. He wants us to proclaim liberty to the captives (Is. 61:1) and He sets them free.

We packed up the clinic and loaded everything in the buses and said our tearful goodbyes to the girls. When we left they all hugged us and said "I'll miss you" and "Don't forget me" and "Write me" and "Send me copies of your pictures." One little girl Kenia really attached herself to me this week. I held her hand while she had her first pelvic exam and she was always next to me every time I turned around. When it was time for me to go today she just sobbed. I can't imagine how hard it would be if she reacted like this every time a group comes - I hope it's not always this hard for her. It was a lot harder for her than for the girls I'm sponsoring.....I really got to know her better than I did them, but she is already sponsored....I wonder what it's like for them to see group after group come in and love them and serve them but then always have to say goodbye. They have had to say goodbye to so very many people in their short lives. I wonder if they are sad because the group left or if they are able to be glad that we came. I think after all the loss they have experienced that it would be really hard.....

Day 7 - 1/14/11

Today is our fun day, but we started out with another intense testimony at morning devotions. God just keeps driving it home to me that every single one of His children suffers. We all have our stories to tell and each of our stories has made us who we are and has made our faith what it is. As we share our stories, the sharing is part of God working things together for good - we benefit from the sharing and there is always someone in the group whose life is impacted and whose faith is strengthened.

The woman who shared this morning quoted Corrie ten Boom: "When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away your ticket. You sit back and trust the engineer." Would that I could live my life with deeper and more consistent trust in the engineer!

Tonight we had our banquet at the airport hotel. But more importantly we got a big drink of cold (not slightly below room temperature) water and we got to shower with hot (not slightly above room temperature) water. Heavenly!!

The banquet was a nice time of celebration with the CMDA local Nicaraguan team, our team, the HoH directors, and all the translators. The translators are a group I have not written about at all because I did not have one personally (since I speak Spanish). But they were a group that was dramatically impacted this week. They were all female and are all college or medical students. They come from upper middle class type backgrounds and they were every bit as shocked by all that we saw this week as we were. One of them told me, "This is not my Nicaragua" - which made me wonder about the USA's that I don't know. I imagine there are things at home that would shock me as much as this did her. In addition to their very different background, these translators didn't even know what they were getting into. They just knew they were going to translate for a medical team - which is very different from "You are going to translate for a group of lady doctors doing Pap smears and examining genital discharge in a group of prostitutes." They were naive and young a week ago, but they have become a lot more educated. Despite the craziness and the shock of the week, they were troopers. They did every single thing we asked them to do. We were so grateful to them.

At the banquet Gloria shared a story that many of us had not yet heard. Gloria coordinated the purchase and import of some gynecological equipment to treat pre-cancerous changes on the cervix. Cervical cancer is an STD, making the HoH ladies at very high risk for it. So having the equipment to identify and treat it when our team comes down here can literally be life-saving for them. But first the equipment was held up in the Ministry of Health for days and it looked like we wouldn't be able to get it. Then we finally got it and Gloria and Cara did a LEEP procedure on one of the ladies (cutting out a large area of pre-cancerous tissue). After the procedure many people were gathered around in excitement and helping clean the room when suddenly Cara realized that the biopsy specimen was missing. Everyone began looking for it everywhere. They finally realized that it must have been thrown away so they began to dig through the trash. They still couldn't find it and they realized that one of the trash cans had been emptied. When they asked where that trash was, they were told it was being burned. Gloria, who does not speak Spanish, ran across the HoH campus yelling "Uno momento, Uno momento!!!" When she got to the fire, the bag of trash was in there. Gloria told the people burning the trash to get that bag out, but when they picked it up, the bottom fell out and all the trash fell into the flames. Gloria's interpreter saw the jar with the biopsy specimen fall into the fire and she immediately reached in with her bare hand and pulled it out. Gloria pointed out that all the work at HoH is a battle of hand-to-hand combat between God and Satan - that Satan wants to pull these women into the fire for eternity. But God, like Gloria's interpreter, cares enough about each of them that he will run to the fire, reach in, and pull them out. Wow.

In total, we saw over 800 patients for medical care and over 600 for dental care. No wonder we're tired!

Day 8 - 1/15/11

We say goodbye and split into the group going through Houston and the group going through Miami (which, though you would assume otherwise, includes me). Can't wait to get home and see David and the kids! We are now in Miami. When we got off the flight here, we walked out of the plane and heard.....SPANISH!! We concluded that when you get to Miami you are almost in America!

One of our team members gave the perfect description of this week. I didn't think of it, but I will certainly be repeating it: "This week I saw the place where Heaven meets Hell, and Heaven wins."