

GIVING BACK



Beyond Borders

WOMEN FOR DIRECT RELIEF INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL TO EL SALVADOR

Inside the mighty heart of Direct Relief International—Santa Barbara’s heralded nonprofit that distributes medical supplies to healthcare providers in 56 countries—lies a vital chamber alive with compassionate activism: Women for Direct Relief. This support group is made up of community volunteers, staff and board members, many of whom have the chops to run a small country. This dedicated group of women—diverse in experience, backgrounds and talents—has evolved since its formation in 2000 into an unofficial action committee more than 250 members strong. Winery owner Kate Firestone, communications consultant Alixe Mattingly and Cottage Hospital chief of staff Dr. Ayesha Shaikh are just three participants with the group, which is open to all interested local women. Together, members address living conditions and health-related issues of women around the world

through Direct Relief-sponsored programs and service trips abroad to some of the world’s least developed countries.

“It’s all about serving where we’re needed, raising funds for Direct Relief and doing it with joy and gratitude,” says Nancy Walker Koppelman, a local activist and force of nature who founded the group and acts as its informal leader. “I insist on having fun, because serving joyfully is contagious!” Sherry Villanueva, a Target Corporation marketing consultant, is equally enthusiastic. “It’s real ‘money and time where your mouth is’ kind of support,” she says. “The Women for Direct Relief take the time to educate themselves and take action even though most are incredibly busy working or volunteering full-time.”

As part of its packed schedule, the group ventures out of Santa Barbara and into the field. In March 2003, 15 members embarked

FUDEM staff in El Salvador team up with Women for Direct Relief volunteers. LEFT TO RIGHT, BACK ROW: Lori Willis, Jamie Gumins, Beth Pitton, Rita Moya, Nancy Walker Koppelman, Dr. Ayesha Shaikh. MIDDLE: Blanca Salazar, Dina Tobías, Janeth Cruz, Nancy Cruz, Nina Palomo, Kate Firestone. FRONT ROW: Sherry Villanueva, Alex Sanchez, Yajaira Urriola, Marissa Grimes, Dorothy Largay.

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on Women for Direct Relief's first global health mission to Las Varas, Mexico, to assist Casa Clinica Convivencia Campesina doctors who attend to hundreds of women and children.

Late last year, another 10 members (Firestone, Koppelman, Shaikh and Villanueva, among others) set off on a five-day working trip—at their own expense—to El Salvador to help Direct Relief partner FUDEM (Fundación para el Desarrollo de la Mujer), the Central American country's largest eye-care charity, founded in 1989 by Direct Relief board member and FUDEM president Nina Paloma. Trained by the FUDEM staff, the women worked one-on-one with patients, performing visual acuity tests and distributing high-dose vitamin A to children to prevent blindness. Wearing bright orange T-shirts bearing the names Direct Relief and FUDEM, members met with 1,800 men, women and children during three days. "We learned about the country and the needs of the people from a medical point of view," says Kate Firestone. "We saw what the amazing FUDEM eye clinics are doing for the poor." Inspired by the impact of its hands-on fieldwork in El Salvador, where nearly 50 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, the group is now planning two service trips later this year; one to Kenya and Uganda and another to Laos and Cambodia.

Understandably, Direct Relief's president and CEO Thomas Tighe is in awe of the women in his midst. "The material and financial assistance that we provide is probably less important to people in impoverished areas than [their] knowing there are people who believe in them, are rooting for them and will back them," he says. "These extraordinary women are the very heart of what we stand for." ■

If you are interested in joining Women for Direct Relief, the annual Direct Relief shareholders' meeting is on May 17 at Fess Parker's DoubleTree Resort, 633 E. Cabrillo Blvd., Santa Barbara, 805-564-4333. For more information, call 805-964-4767 or visit directrelief.org.

Santa Barbara Magazine April/May 2007

