

Chiapas Connection

Spring 2021

Clinic-in-a-Can Finally Lands in Palenque!



Top: Srs. Mica, Ilse, Candi and Leti in front of one of the units.

Bottom: A completed unit ready to welcome patients.

After what seems to be a lifetime of planning, the dream of establishing Clínica Familiar Lak Ña Clara is now a reality! Toss in a hurricane, a few tropical storms, a world-wide pandemic and government bureaucracy - it truly is God's Providence that delivered us to this end point!

The journey, however, plays out like a movie. Let's look back to see how far we've come.

Scene One outlines the spark of a dream to establish a health care clinic that began nearly 20 years ago. The back story is our bi-annual medical mission, which for more than 25 years has delivered desperately needed care to indigenous people in the remote villages surrounding Palenque. Serving as many as 750 patients in a week's time, medical professionals gave their time and expertise to participate in the mission coordinated by the Sisters of St. Francis of Holy Name Province. Time and again the medical missions would emphasize the need for a more permanent solution to providing a continuum of care for the people.

Scene Two outlines the discovery of what appeared to be the best solution: "Clinic-in-a-Can!" With this, the sisters moved in earnest to bringing the dream to fruition.

Already in use throughout the world, the units are tractor-trailer storage containers that are specially designed mobile clinics capable of being moved anywhere in the world. Each container is turn-key ready to the purchaser's specifications, including being fully equipped with state-of-the-art medical equipment. The units are durable to withstand extreme conditions, climate controlled with super efficient technology for extreme temperatures and off-the-grid capabilities, environmentally friendly and infection control compliant -- meeting or exceeding all US and EU standards.



Start by doing what's necessary, then do what's possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible.

St. Francis of Assisi

Claudia Sierra, Interim Clinic Director, is introduced in Scene Three. She was hired to work with the sisters to formulate a business plan and establish the partnerships needed to move forward. By 2019, initial plans were in place and, after securing the funding, 11 Clinic-in-a-Can containers were ordered. Business matters were also wrapped up: a Tax ID number obtained, the legal-corporate-financial relationship between the Clinic and the Sisters of St. Francis formalized, an HR person selected and business policies developed. By June 2020, the sisters received the good news that the units were on their way from the factory in Wichita, Kansas to a port in Houston, Texas!

In the opening of Scene Four Tropical storm Cristobal was swirling in the Gulf of Mexico just as the containers were arriving at the Houston Port. The containers were moved into port storage, awaiting Mexican authority approval to load them onto a cargo ship bound for Port Progreso in Merida, Mexico. No one imagined this layover would extend more than six months at a cost of \$7,000/month, and expose the containers to three tropical storms and a hurricane!

Meanwhile, Claudia and the sisters worked diligently to meet the constant requests for information

about the containers from Mexico's Federal Commission for Protection against Sanitary Risks (COFEPRIS). Two teams of consultants prepared the meticulous paperwork required by various agencies, and our own team met multiple times with officials in Mexico City -- still the required permits were denied! The grueling and frustrating experience was prolonged due COVID-19 closures, miscommunication between various government agencies, and suspected corruption. Despite it all, the sisters' firm belief that "God will provide" never wavered.

Scene Five highlights the many other site activities that were completed prior to the units' arrival. The 3-acre permaculture project now had a magnificent greenhouse, composting area and, most impressive of all, a large pond made up of two natural springs. To the Mayan people an "Ojo de Agua" (water hole) is a sign of Blessing. The project now holds the promise of organic gardens filled with vegetables, fruits, and medicinal plants to aid in the care of the patients.

The muddy Palenque soil was amended to create a solid foundation by excavating the existing soil, compacting a gravel fill and placing the steel girders on which the containers would finally rest.





Scene Six (cue dramatic music!)...Shortly before Christmas, news was received that the containers had clearance to be transported to Palenque! It felt like nothing short of a miracle!

Suddenly there was a flurry of activity as roads needed to be leveled and cleared of obstructions for the tracker trailers.

Villagers gathered to watch and help. There were men who transported the containers from the Port in Merida to Palenque, men who worked the large crane that lifted the containers onto the prepared foundation, City Police and Patrols who escorted the 11 containers through the streets of Palenque, local women who came to clean the interior of the containers, and laborers who provided strong hands of support.

The last two weeks of January 2021 is covered in Scene Seven when a Clinic-in-a-Can crew of four journeyed from Kansas to Palenque to put the final touches on the 11 containers. The sisters provided splendid hospitality, including nutritious meals for the men who worked tirelessly from early morning to night. Utility and water supply lines were connected, medical equipment and furniture were secured to the floors and walls, solar panels installed on the rooftops, and final cosmetic touches were completed. The transformation was like magic!

The saying “many hands make light work” was never more true than when the entire community came together to transform 11 shipping containers into a magnificent clinic! The local people were amazed upon realizing that this was for their benefit, saying, “We have never seen anything like this! There are still good people in the world who care about us.”

Everyone marveled over the well-equipped containers that housed a laboratory, x-ray room, advanced mother-infant unit, four consultation rooms and a double surgical suite that housed two surgery units and a dressing room, bathroom, shower area, and lockers.

Thank you for being part of this, for your encouragement and belief that this could happen
... **for this was God’s work and God provided!**



COVID-19 Postpones Medical Missions

Things were full steam ahead for the February 2020 medical mission (pictured to the left) when our complement of medical volunteers made their way to Palenque. While the villagers are materially poor, they are not looking for charity. Each pays whatever they can for the medical care provided -- this time around, the team received a chicken as payment from one grateful patient! As usual, the team provided medical care, advice and medications, and each patient received a new toothbrush.



We are blessed with faithful volunteers, many of whom participate yearly. While it wasn't a surprise, it was a disappointment to learn that the November 2020 and February 2021 medical missions were canceled because of COVID-19. It's too early to determine when our medical mission will resume, but there will always be a vital need to provide health care to the indigenous people in the most outlying villages.

The rise of COVID-19 in Palenque has created fear and disinformation. There is an acute lack of education and critical skepticism about the virus and many families attribute deaths to influenza, respiratory problems, Dengue fever or "unknown causes." Precautions such as wearing a mask are not often taken and the small local hospital does not have the resources to care for the people of Palenque, which includes the surrounding 143 village communities.



Fortunately, our sisters were able to secure a grant for emergency COVID-19 response, which enabled them to purchase PPE supplies as well as food to help villagers unable to work due to illness. They shared the supplies with other providers and worked diligently to advise people on methods to protect themselves.



Throughout it all, our sisters continue to be a Franciscan presence to others by continuing their pastoral ministry. There is a new Pastor who depends on their leadership to provide for the faith formation, liturgical celebrations and pastoral visits for the community of believers in both urban and village areas.

While extremely busy with pastoral ministry and their roles in developing the Clinic-in-a-Can project, two of our sisters completed education programs. Sister Candi earned a business degree, positioning her well for her role in the clinic. Sister Ilse completed her nursing degree and will soon obtain her nursing license.



Pictured at the left are Sisters Connie, Leti, Ilse, Maria Elena, Candi and Mica. Sisters Connie and Maria Elena had left Palenque in 2020 near the start of the COVID-19 outbreak and were finally able to return in February 2021, although they were only able to stay for two weeks. However, they are encouraged by the leadership the young sisters have shown, and will continue to offer support via weekly Zoom calls. The sisters in Palenque also garner support as a member of the Latin American Women Religious, a group that provides educational opportunities and a sounding board for ideas.

The Sisters of St. Francis are deeply grateful for the tremendous support received by our friends, donors and volunteers who make this mission possible.

Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity Chiapas Medical Mission

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