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Nurses perform needed surgery in Honduras

by **KATHLEEN STEFFEN**
contributing writer

Giving back is the reason two nurses from Lapeer traveled to Honduras recently on a surgical mission.

Nurse anesthetist Char Ryan, 56, and surgical registered nurse Heidi Douglas, 40, went to Honduras Oct. 28 through Nov. 4 with a team of 16 to provide general surgeries to people who would otherwise go without medical care. Over the week, they did 73 surgeries — everything from gall bladders to hernias.

"The surgical patients are 100 percent dependent on mission groups coming," Douglas said. "They would have to travel a long way to get surgical help and a lot of them can't really afford to travel that far."

"They can't afford to go to the government hospital — it costs too much," Ryan said. "They'll wait and come to the missionary hospital if they can."

The week before traveling to Honduras, Ryan went on a similar mission to Guatemala with another nurse anesthetist from Lapeer, Liz Franckwoiak.

Ryan, who organized the Honduras trip with Dr. Ann Woodward, formerly of Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit and now of Phoenix, has been traveling on medical missions to Honduras since 1998. She's been there nine or 10 times. Douglas was on her first medical mission and is the first member of the Lapeer Regional Medical Center (LRMC) staff to attend.

"I turned 40 and needed to step out of my little box," Douglas said. "I've never done anything really exciting so I wanted to step out of my box and help out somebody else."

The Evangelical International Ministries hospital the team goes to is only about five years old, but supplies are limited. Douglas carried her personal items on the plane and checked two crates of medical supplies.

"The quality has improved. As an example, on my first trip there weren't any bed linens on the (operating) tables, so we would put paper down for the patient to lie on," Ryan said. That changed because hospitals like LRMC donate linens.

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Ryan has also received donations from Marlette Regional Hospital and Genesys Regional Medical Center in Grand Blanc. Woodward also gathers donations.

Ryan is a contract nurse anesthetist, working in Lapeer and Grand Blanc. The former Charlene Maples is a 1969 graduate of Imlay City High School and attended Mott College and Oakland University before earning her master's degree in anesthesiology from what is now known as the University of Detroit-Mercy.

Ryan worked at Henry Ford Hospital where she first met Dr. John Ferrera who organized the twice-yearly medical missions in the spring and fall. One of the people he also recruited was Woodward, then a surgical resident at the hospital.

Ryan and Douglas have similar reasons for wanting to help patients in Honduras.

"I've always been paid

for my efforts and I just thought it would be nice to give back," said Douglas, who has worked for 10 years in the operating room at LRMC.

"I just think that you need to give back," Ryan said, noting she feels privileged to work in her field. "I think I've reached this point because that's what I'm supposed to do."

Douglas said staff at the hospital in Honduras welcome Ryan with open arms. "They're so grateful that she's there," Douglas said. "They know her and they just come and seek her out and hug her and thank her for coming."

Interpreters help the medical team and the Spanish-speaking patients communicate.

"We obviously have a language barrier. I speak no Spanish and Char doesn't either. Mostly, you can tell how grateful they are in their eyes and the expression on their faces," Douglas said. "Their eyes tell you much more than even the words."

When she first started traveling to Honduras, Ryan would recruit people, but now word has gotten out and a lot of people are interested. She even takes people who do not have a medical background. "They help in the operating room and getting supplies. There are all kinds of things they can do. We try not to limit them and help them learn," she said.

Neither Douglas or Ryan hesitated to answer yes when asked if they would travel back to Honduras on medical missions.

Douglas said she would "absolutely" travel to Honduras again. "I came away from this experience very humbled and grateful for everything that I have."

Ryan said she will go "as long as I can. If I was independently wealthy, that's all I would do."

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