



Flávio Otzín

Comalapa, Guatemala

I have a photo from the groundbreaking of the Kaslen Hospital in 1978. Our idea was to construct the building all together, just like we built houses. If somebody needed a house, we in the community would work together and build it in one day. Everybody did something, including carrying water, preparing food. By evening, a family had a new adobe house. We used this same model for building our new hospital. We wanted and needed it because there was no other hospital nearby. The Behrhorst “Hospitalito” was the closest and we wanted one just like it. We copied the Behrhorst approach – families stayed with their ill ones to take care of them. Staff not only spoke Kaqchikel but also wore traditional clothes, not white smocks.

This was two years after the earthquake of 1976 which caused terrible destruction in Comalapa. An organization from Spain, “Caritas Espanoles” had volunteered in Comalapa and when they were ready to leave, they left their equipment, medical supplies, with us. We said, “This is the start of our new hospital.”

Our priest, from Spain, was our main leader. He helped us organize. We had a main committee with subcommittees, and we all worked together, Catholics, Evangelicals, cooperatives. We built Kaslen with our own hands, on weekends, at night. Everybody was very happy with our project. When we ran out of money to buy more materials, we raised it ourselves by showing rented movies in Comalapa.

Our next question was, “Who will work in the hospital?” We determined that we wanted our own people to be the staff. We could speak Kaqchikel and, of course, we understood our own culture and what makes people comfortable, especially when they are sick. We selected people who then got training as auxiliary nurses and other positions. We needed someone to train as an X-ray technician. The minimal educational requirement was the completion of primary school. There were three of us who had completed primary, and all of us wanted the position. There was an election, a secret vote, and I won. Some people were against me, but our priest said to them, “Majority rules. This is what we follow and how we will work together. This is a project of the people, all the people.”

Of course I was happy to have been selected, but then my worries set in. How could I afford to leave my other work (agriculture and construction) for the training? My friend noticed that I was preoccupied and asked me what was wrong. When I told him that I had no idea how I could support my family and get trained as an X-ray technician at

the same time, he said to me, "Trust God. You are gaining new knowledge which will help you and help Comalapa in the years ahead. You need to make sacrifices now but they will pay off." How right he was!

I went to Behrhorst for training, and that is where I met my teacher and friend, Emilio. He said to me, "I am not a professional. I was trained by someone who came from the U.S., and now I know how to be an X-ray technician. I will teach you all that I know." That training lasted 8 months, every week Monday through Friday.

Emilio not only taught me about X-rays; he shared his sense of serving people. He said, "I believe that we are here on earth to serve and love our neighbors. This is what I can do by taking X-rays, helping people who are hurt, working with others here at Behrhorst." These are words that I keep in my heart.

What a financial sacrifice it was! We sold our chickens. We did without. I ate a very small lunch, and when others asked if I wanted some of their food, I said, "Thank you. I'm fine."

I was able to observe Dr. Behrhorst, also, during those months. Once he was speaking to a woman who said she was sick. Dr. Behrhorst said to her, "You're not sick. You're hungry. Here is some money for tortillas and beans."

Sala (Room) Five was the TB section. Once a Quiché family was there because of the father's TB. He was near death and the family said to Dr. Behrhorst that he wanted to die back home. Dr. Behrhorst said, "Very well. We'll get a driver to take you home to Quiché so you can die there." Then he turned to the wife and said, "Bury your husband, but then come back here to get your own treatment for TB so that you can live."

Another time, a person who was an alcoholic came to "dry out" in the hospital. He had money. He said, "I want my own room, not a shared room. I want only my bed in there, I want to bring my TV, and I want privacy." Dr. Behrhorst said, "Fine. This will cost you more money." The man said that was no problem. Dr. Behrhorst turned to me and said, "This is how we work. The income which comes from those who pay more can be used to help those who need help, but who have no money."

After my Behrhorst training, I became the X-ray technician at Kaslen. I worked there for ten years until I was compelled to find a job that paid more money. That's when I came to the National Hospital where I have worked for the last 18 years. For this I needed an official certification as an X-ray technician; the Behrhorst training could not provide this. So I got into a Ministry of Health program which gave me more training, but more importantly, gave me the government stamp of approval. I became a certified Diagnostic X-Ray Technician.

There is always a tension between providing financially for my family and serving my community. My children needed money for school. I wanted to make sure that they had more educational opportunities than I had; I needed to think of their futures, too.

Through the years, Kaslen suffered from weak administration and functioned poorly. Now, just since February, 2007, some of us original founders have been asked to help rebuild the program. I now am president of the board and am working very hard to restore the effort so that we can respond well to community health needs. Dr. Salazar from the Behrhorst Foundation gives me a lot of support and counsel. He's from Comalapa and understands our situation. Also, we have just begun a training program for midwives in collaboration with ASECSA. And we now have an ambulance, well, a 1978 van, which we are using to bring people into the National Hospital when they need more help than we can give them in Comalapa. We have many plans together to strengthen the Kaslen services for these times.

Of course, the next part of our story is that of our daughter Mirian and her getting a job at Behrhorst. It was the best decision she ever made!