



Flying Samaritans
Mother Lode Chapter
Clinic Report - August 2022

A Renewal of the Heart



I finally made it! I had been planning for over a year to travel with the Flying Samaritans to participate in the medical clinic in San Quintin. Unfortunately, the COVID pandemic and several other mishaps interfered with those plans. However, the wait was certainly worth it!

I was very nervous and excited as I waited in the Paso Robles airport. While everyone had been very helpful with answering my questions about the clinic, I was still increasingly concerned about how this whole process would work. This was my first time working as a physician in this type of setting, and I wanted to be able to do the best I could for both the patients and the rest of my team. Once we were underway in Doug Wirzberger's plane, he very graciously explained many of the details and helped to put my mind at ease. By the way...I would be remiss if I did not say thank you to Doug and the gang for meeting me in Paso!

On arrival at Los Pinos, I had a chance to tour the clinic and see the layout, which was very helpful.

Everyone was so welcoming. That evening we had a team meeting to discuss logistics and, of course, have our first round of the all-important street tacos (and maybe a few cervezas)!

The following morning we went to the clinic, about 30 minutes away from our hotel by car, and got right to work! There were several folks already patiently waiting in the outdoor area. I first did a little bit of "window shopping" in the clinic cabinets to get a better feel for what medications, tests, etc. I had at my disposal. I then stood by a bit nervously as we started to room patients.

My first few patients had rather complex issues, and I was tremendously grateful for Cecilia and the veteran volunteers for helping me understand what we had available in the local community and through our volunteer organization. As a hospitalist in a smaller community in California, I have frequently complained about our lack of certain specialties or facilities. But this little community in Baja reminded me how incredibly wealthy we are in this country. In some cases I was heartbroken because I could do so little. I generated a list of "needs" to try to fill for these patients on my return to the U.S.

As the day progressed my energy might have waned but my enthusiasm remained intact. And once again my energy stores were refueled by a street taco or two! I continued to be amazed by the courtesy and gratitude of the patients I saw that day. They showed tremendous appreciation for the simple medications and instruction I was able to provide. I was so blessed by numerous hugs from patients and prayers that were delivered on my behalf, despite frequently feeling I was woefully unable to meet their needs.

Continued →



I was also very grateful to work with a fantastic, giving group of people. I had two wonderful translators help me communicate with the patients. My very simple, present-tense only Spanish was certainly not enough. Wendy and Max live in the community, and many of the patients were their friends, neighbors, and even family members. In addition to translating the words, they were also able to provide insights into the community culture and were aware of what other resources might find helpful. They were indispensable.

Speaking of indispensable, I simply must give a special shout out to my fellow team member Valerie Schwander. She was the person who was seemingly everywhere all at once, doing anything and everything that needed to be done. I am grateful to have spent time working with you, and with our whole team!

My first clinic day with the Flying Samaritans went well beyond my expectations. I will certainly encourage my colleagues in the states to consider participating. It helped to renew my heart to practice medicine. In a time of overwhelming bureaucracy in medicine, this was an opportunity to practice medicine the way I think most of us would like to practice, free of the overwhelming administrative burdens, and in conjunction with other generous, like-minded caregivers. I only hope that at least on some level I was able to meet the needs of those patients. I am most eagerly awaiting the next opportunity to work at the clinic once again!

**-Gretchen Winter
Phd., DO**

Del Presidente



After more than 8 years serving as President of the Mother Lode Chapter of Flying Samaritans, I have decided it is time to step down. Effective September 30, I will be resigning from the role of President. I plan to continue remain on the Board of Directors as Past President and also to serve as Membership Coordinator. I will also fly as a volunteer pilot to as many clinics as I can.

This is an excellent opportunity for someone to step up and continue the wonderful legacy in San Quintin! As you may know, the Mother Lode chapter has been serving the residents of the San Quintin area since 1977. We are fortunate to have such incredible clinic facilities in a great location! We have grown a strong support structure of local volunteers that provide essential help to our optical, medical and dental clinics. Our finances are in great condition when compared to what they were in 2014.

In case you are interested in taking on the role of Mother Lode President, please let me know by email. I can guarantee that you will feel the same high level of pride as I have in knowing that your dedication is helping so many needy people in San Quintin.

-Doug Wirzberger

Thank You Doug!

The Board of Directors and the entire membership of the Flying Samaritans Mother Lode Chapter are truly grateful for the leadership and dedication Doug has shown throughout his time as Chapter President. The numerous obstacles he helped us navigate, not least of which was the COVID pandemic and eventual resumption of clinic services, has made the organization stronger and more durable than it's ever been. We thank Doug for his selfless generosity and perseverance to help make the Chapter what it is today and the decades of future benefit to the people of San Quintin that are a result of his hard work. A sincere thank you from all of us!

COVID Testing for Clinic Due to the recent spike in cases due to the Omicron variant, we are required that each traveling volunteer submits a negative COVID test within 24 hours of departure for the clinic. To keep this as hassle-free as possible, any home test can be used. The test must be taken between 9AM and 10PM on the day before the clinic. A picture of the negative results must be sent via email or text message to Doug Wirzberger by 10Pm on the night before clinic departure. Attendees will receive further details via email a week before the clinic. We hope to be able to eliminate this requirement in the late summer. But for now, we surely appreciate your compliance, patience and understanding

NEW - Shareable QR Codes for Clinic

Now you can share QR codes (that can be opened with any smartphone camera) that link directly to the chapter website including signing up for clinic. Please feel free to share the codes below:



[Alma Luminosa Clinic](#)



www.flyingsamaritans.net



[Flying Sams Pilot Recruiting](#)



[Map to Alma Luminosa Clinic](#)

Introducing Our New Medical Clinic Coordinator Team!

Jessica Willett: Dr. Willett is a Family Medicine & Emergency Medicine trained physician based out of Northern California. She currently works in the ED at San Joaquin General Hospital. She has a background in education and is passionate about prehospital care, global health, and community outreach in limited-resource settings. She loves to travel and experience the world when she has time. She has worked closely with various international medical organizations and is excited to bring her experience to the Flying Samaritans.

Angela Cheung: Angela is a Physician Assistant with a background in Public Health. She works at San Joaquin General Hospital in Stockton, California and is dedicated to community advocacy with underserved populations. Her career thus far has been driven by volunteerism. In her free time, she loves to spend time with her two hairless cats, travel, and dive.

Kristina Young: Kristina is a pre-med student and currently works as a scribe at San Joaquin General Hospital, a busy level II trauma center. She is passionate about rural and community health, and plans to focus on these areas throughout her career. Born and raised in the Central Valley, she is now raising her own family in the place she has always called home. In her free time, she is an avid reader and amateur chef.



Left to right: Angela Cheung, Jessica Willett, and Kristina Young

Email Spam Folder

Email providers are making it more difficult to deliver email to you. The Flying Samaritans rely heavily on email as our primary means of communication with our members. Unfortunately, some email providers flag our communications as "spam" and the emails wind up in your spam or junk email folders. Please be sure to check your spam folders for our emails! More importantly, please mention this request to other members who may not be savvy enough to check their spam folders.

Pre-Departure COVID Test

Due to the recent spike in cases due to the Omicron variant, we are required that each traveling volunteer submits a negative COVID test within 24 hours of departure for the clinic. To keep this as hassle-free as possible, any home test can be used. The test must be taken between 9AM and 10PM on the day before the clinic. A picture of the negative results must be sent via email or text message to Doug Wirzberger by 10Pm on the night before clinic departure. Attendees will receive further details via email a week before the clinic. We hope to be able to eliminate this requirement in the late summer. But for now, we surely appreciate your compliance, patience and understanding.



Flying Samaritans®

SAMARITANOS VOLADORES

Optical Clinic



I was a first timer to San Quintin clinic recently. Having been to my first clinic with Sams in San Felipe in April to assist the Optical efforts I was a little apprehensive to repeat again so soon and had no idea who I would be flying and working with. Dr. Demshar was very convincing so off I went.

I currently own and operate an Optical retail store with an "in house lab" and have a great crew capable of almost any Rx. I like to say if it can be done, we can do it, and have been at the same location over 22 years. I typically work 6 days a week so volunteer work is a challenge, however I must say that the

people of Mexico I've worked with are the most gracious and happy and appreciate our efforts so much when I'm on my way home I can't stop telling myself to "shut the heck up and be happy with all that we have here in the USA". My plan is to stay involved in any way I can for as long as I can. Thanks to Doug, Mark, Valerie, Todd, Elise, Gretchen and all the folks south of the border for allowing me to participate in some of the most satisfying days (and nights) I can remember.

**-Eric Shelton,
Optician/Lab Technician**



Distributing Donated Glasses

The people of San Quintín need us and support us



The patients treated by Flying Samaritans Mother Lodi Chapter at the Alma Luminosa Clinic in San Quintín have crucial health needs, and the volunteers from San Quintín are our biggest supporters.

Flying Sams recently resumed its monthly flights to staff the Alma Luminosa Clinic. The name means “shining soul” is Spanish. It is located at the sprawling Los Pinos ranch, the largest agricultural enterprise in Baja California, according to Wikipedia. The aging blue-green stucco buildings sit amid a sea of shade structures covered with malla, brown nylon netting that shades early season vegetables from the intense desert sun.

Our pilots use the private Los Pinos Airport near San Quintín which lies 10 miles north on the Pacific coast. Doug Wirzberger, president of the Flying Sam’s Mother Lode chapter, thought our readers would like to know something about the needs and lives of our patients and also meet some of the people in San Quintín who make the clinic possible. Below are stories of the people I met when I flew down to the November 13 clinic.

Gabriela Camarillo Ramirez, 65, was born in Mexicali and worked in Southern California for a while. But she ended up at Los Pinos packing tomatoes and cucumbers and planting lettuce and strawberries for export to San Diego, Los Angeles and Santa Barbara. The work had her standing 12 hours a day, six days a week. When she developed diabetes, the foot pain forced her to quit. She has a small pension, still works at a store and cares for her 92-year-old mother.

They live with Gabriela’s brother and sister in a one-story cinder-block house with one bathroom and a small kitchen. Her sister works in a store in San Quintín; her brother herds goats and sheep. She has been coming to Alma Luminosa Clinic for 13 years to get help with her eyes and to receive medicine to control her diabetes. She has received free glasses and a referral that allowed her to receive care through Mexico’s Social Security System. Thanks to a diagnosis she received at Alma Luminosa she recently receive laser eye surgery in Tijuana, four hours away.

“I’m happy to have the service. Everyone is very professional,” she said. Marco Antonio Nocelotl Merino, 33, arrived at Los Pinos a month ago, travelling from the southern Mexican state of Puebla with his wife and 3-year-old son. In Cholula, Pue., he earned \$8.64 per day, for a 12-hour day. In Los Pinos he earns half again as much — \$13.20 per day — working in the structure where workers recycle the worn nylon netting, damaged wooden posts and motor oil used by the ranch’s huge truck fleet.

He came for a free pair of eye glasses to correct his myopia. Alma Luminosa Clinic, he said, “is a real help.”

Estela Mendoza Ruiz, a woman in her 60s, also came to the clinic for new glasses. Her job at Los Pinos is grafting various tomato varieties onto disease-resistant root stock.



The people of San Quintín need us and support us



Manuela Carmen Quiróz Jimenez plants tomatoes and cucumbers in outdoor fields at nearby Rancho San Marcos. The constant sunshine has afflicted her eyes with pterygium, which causes an opaque growth on the side of each eye. She was diagnosed by Flying Sams optometrist John Demshar who said in a year or so the growth will start to cover her iris and become inoperable. In that time, he hopes to find the laser surgical equipment to remove the growth and halt its threat to her vision.

When Uriel Flores Simón, 22, began telling me about his life, he seemed like one of Mexico's fortunate sons. He recently graduated from the Autonomous University of Guerrero near Acapulco with a degree in agronomy. During his time in college, he published a paper on a disease that afflicts blue agave, the plant from which tequila is made.

But after graduation he was unable to find professional work in agriculture. He said his father's family back in Guerrero has land planted in coffee. His mother's family has land from which they harvest peaches, pears and cumquats. Sadly, his mother and father recently divorced and there was no gainful employment available from either family. So Uriel and his mother are picking tomatoes in the vast shaded structures at Los Pinos.

He came to Alma Luminosa Clinic for help with pain in his knees and myopia. He has a university degree, published a scientific paper, speaks three languages and is unable to afford a pair of glasses.

These are just some of the 80 or so patients seen at Alma Luminosa on November 12. If we had been able to open the dental clinic, we would have seen twice as many patients. That's the judgment of Cecilia Castro Rueda. She is local clinic coordinator responsible for keeping the community apprised of the Flying Sams clinic dates and services via the Internet, local radio and posted fliers. She and other volunteers prepare the clinic for the monthly arrival of doctors, nurses and other health professionals from California. She keeps President Doug and other Flying Sams leaders apprised of needed maintenance and developments on the ranch.

On clinic days, she and others scurry to supply American doctors, nurses and technicians with medicine, equipment and anything else they need to treat patients.

According to Doug, it takes five to seven adult volunteers from Mexico to run a clinic and about six young volunteers ages 12 to 17. Cecilia has been volunteering at our monthly clinics for about seven years. She is one of four local volunteers whose English skills are essential to good patient-caregiver communications. She lived 30 years in Phoenix but now lives nearby the clinic in Ejido Nuevo Mexicali. She is an "ama de casa" — the Spanish term for housewife and translated literally, it means "one who loves her home." She has two grown children and a son and daughter still at home. Her husband is a mobile auto mechanic, taking his services to clients all over the San Quintín area.

Although she has no training as a health profession she volunteers at the clinic "...because I like to help people." Imelda Rivera Hernandez and her niece Maria José Romero were in charge of greeting patients on November 12. Imelda comes to Alma Luminosa every month that the Flying Samaritans open the clinic. She has volunteered there for 22 years.

The people of San Quintín need us and support us

"It's a way of showing gratitude for what I have," she said. Imelda has two daughters 17 and 10, and a son who is 7. Her husband is an administrator at a nearby quarry that mines gravel and other building materials.

Imelda is acutely aware of the need for good health care in the San Quintín area. Her father recently died of complications of diabetes at the age of 67 and she has signs of the disease.

The Mother Lode Flying Sams has been putting on clinics in San Quintín since 1977. I asked Cecilia where local patients would go if they didn't have the services offered by Flying Samaritans.

"They would have to rely on Social Security," Mexico's meager equivalent to American Social Security and Medicare. Or they would have to pay for services at a local pharmacy and the privately owned Hospital Buen Pastor. That hospital does some free service and often cooperates with Flying Sams, but can't begin to meet the charitable needs of the large community.

Patients, Cecilia said, are especially grateful for free dental services at our clinic because "dental service is very expensive in Mexico. People come here from many other states (for dental service)."

Once a month, volunteers from north and south of the border cooperate to make a big impact in a big place.

-Marty Weybret



San Quintín gives high priority to COVID vaccination

Editor's note: This article was originally written after the November, 2021 clinic.

When I first heard that 90 percent of people in the municipality of San Quintín have been vaccinated against COVID-19, I admit— I was skeptical.

Comparisons are hard to make, but according to CNN quoting Our World Data, on November 17, 57.7 percent of Americans were fully vaccinated while 48.7 percent of Mexicans were fully vaccinated. My online source didn't say what the ages for vaccination are in each country, but I presume these percentages apply to the total population of each country.

And I presume the "90 percent" figure for San Quintín applies only to those eligible for their vaccination program — residents over 18.

But if the claim I heard is true, it appears the San Quintín municipal government has done a great job vaccinating its citizens against COVID-19.

Cecilia Castro Rueda, local coordinator for the Alma Luminosa Clinic, gave me some of the details:

In June, the municipal government organized a mass vaccination event at the local army base. The first week, citizens over 50 stayed in their cars as they drove through the base and received injections of Pfizer vaccine. The following week, the one-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine was given to those 40 to 49. During the third week those 18 to 39 also got J&J vaccine. Then during the fourth week, the oldest group went through again for their second dose of Pfizer vaccine.

In less than a month, almost every adult in the community of 25,000 was vaccinated.

I couldn't help myself, I had to check.

As I interviewed patients and Mexican volunteers for this article, I informally asked 16 people if they were vaccinated. Thirteen said "yes" and nearly all of those had gone to the army base for their shots. Of the three Alma Luminosa patients who said they hadn't been vaccinated, two had arrived in San Quintín since June and didn't know there was a clinic downtown where they could receive free vaccination. The other said she had trouble rearranging her work and child care schedule.

Nevertheless, my crude poll shows a vaccination rate of 81 percent of the adults I stumbled across on this one random day. That seems like a much higher vaccination rate than California's Central Valley.

On Nov. 5, San Joaquin County was 55.4 per cent fully vaccinated; Sutter County was at 53.9; and Stanislaus County was at 51.6, according to data compiled by LATimes.com. But in California, vaccination is available down to age 12. Looking at age breakdowns from the 2020 Census I guesstimated San Joaquin's 0-11 population at 16.9% of total population. If that's roughly accurate, it would appear the vaccination rate among San Joaquin County residents age 12 and older is about 66.7%. Could it be higher just among people 18 and older?

(Maybe a better question would be: What do you get when a news writer fiddles with statistics? The term "fake news" comes to mind. But, hey, I tried. You judge.)

Anyway, I didn't speak to anyone at the clinic who expressed fear of COVID-19 vaccines and Cecilia confirmed she doesn't hear a lot of skepticism or conspiracy theories about vaccination in the San Quintín community.

On November 18, she received a public announcement from Baja California Health Secretary J. Adrián Medina Amarillas, saying the state has received 45,000 doses of Pfizer vaccine and San Quintín has been allocated 1,300 doses for teenagers.

"Fortunately, Baja California always sets the standard," said Medina Amarillas. "And thanks to the good vaccination coverage, we have for the moment this batch that will serve to start with our 15- to 17-year-old youngsters."

Cecilia also said the school system will soon begin vaccinating students 12 to 17 years old, using the Astra Zeneca vaccine.

Flying Samaritans is just one part of a hard-working health care system in this part of Mexico.

-Marty Weybret