

THE NEWS & OBSERVER

A journey to ‘repair the world’ Trump denigrates

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Friends have been asking about my recent trip to the Guatemalan village of San Antonio Agua Caliente, where I worked for a week as a volunteer with Nueva Generacion, a non-profit founded by Cindy Schneider of Raleigh. Nueva Generacion provides scholarships to K-12 students who can't otherwise afford the shoes, uniforms and school supplies necessary to attend public school in Guatemala. Currently, about 85 children in the village receive scholarships thanks to donations from contributors in Raleigh and elsewhere who believe education is a ticket out of the cycle of poverty.

Shortly before I left for Guatemala, the headlines focused on President Trump's derogatory remarks about countries many want to escape in hopes of a better life in the United States. Guatemala would probably qualify for Trump's demeaning moniker.

While Guatemala is a country of striking physical beauty, nearly 60 percent of its population lives in poverty, according to the World Bank. Statistics show some of the worst malnutrition and maternal/child mortality rates and extreme income inequality. We saw guards with submachine guns posted outside many businesses, evidence of the high crime rate and violence. These conditions have led to a dramatic increase in emigration – both legal and illegal – to the U.S. from Guatemala over the last decade.

Many people are aware of the abysmal conditions in Guatemala and are motivated to help, just as Cindy Schneider was when she founded Nueva Generacion 15 years ago. On the flight into Guatemala City we met dentists and doctors bringing health care and equipment otherwise unavailable to Guatemalans. We saw Habitat for Humanity groups ready to build houses. Each year Cindy organizes volunteers, many from Temple Beth Or in Raleigh, to go to San Antonio Agua Caliente. We distributed donated school supplies, computers and medical equipment and we built a house for a deserving scholarship family so their children have a safe, well-lighted place to study.

Each evening our group would discuss our experiences and consider the Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam, or repairing the world. Jewish teaching holds that the world is innately good, but its Creator left room for humans to improve it. Every individual is encouraged to engage in their own brand of Tikkun Olam. Seeing the help flowing to Guatemala heartened me and reminded me that the American value of helping those less fortunate was still quietly flourishing behind Trump's bombast.

I returned to the U.S. in time for the president's State of the Union address. Trump's demands for a border wall and portrayal of immigrants as scheming, violent criminals deflated my restored hope from my trip. His position on immigration is polarizing, hateful and simply wrong.

Statistically immigrants are actually less likely to commit crimes than people born in the U.S., according to the Cato Institute. Perhaps because they are highly motivated to work hard to ensure a better life for themselves and their children. Poverty and the desire to escape it is not a crime.

I like to believe the majority of Americans, whose ancestors were all immigrants to this country at one time, are empathetic to the immigrant's struggle today. This historically prevailing legacy is one of the qualities that makes the United States unique in the world. My trip to Guatemala highlighted my hope that Tikkun Olam will ultimately win out over division and hate. Now, if only our core values will survive four years of Trump.