

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 20, 2009 at 12:07pm

Mercy medical mission to Peru transforms lives

by Sr. Camille D'Arienzo



Mercy Sister Karen Schneider treating patients.

"Life is what happens when you're planning something else," was the title of a high school graduation address I unexpectedly gave last June after the school's first choice canceled with an illness. Those nine words contain as much wisdom as I've learned or taught in classrooms through much of my life. They also were to become my mantra later in the summer during an unexpected medical mission trip to Peru.

It was only two weeks after my talk that I accepted an invitation to travel to Chulucanas, Peru. I accompanied an extraordinary woman, Mercy Sister (and doctor) Karen Schneider who was on her 30th trip overseas - and fifth trip to Peru - to bring medical care to impoverished children.

Schneider travels with a team of experienced doctors, nurses and volunteers, some twenty people in all, among them pediatric residents at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore where she works as a practitioner and assistant professor of pediatric emergency medicine. These trips abroad have been so successful that they are now part of medical school's course work. Karen, meanwhile, has become a kind of modern day Pied Piper to the school's students and her colleagues.

Assembled on property owned by the Baltimore archdiocese and bolstered by the presence of four North American women religious, Schneider concluded her welcome to the newly formed group by assuring everyone that Johns Hopkins is not turning into a Catholic institution. Then, with a radiant smile, she added: "But I am a Catholic Sister of Mercy and you're stuck with me."

One of the extraordinary gifts of contemporary apostolic women religious is their ability to network, to extend hospitality and share resources, especially in service of those who suffer the ravages of injustice and poverty. The Sisters of Mercy, originally sent from Merion, Pennsylvania many years ago, have birthed a vibrant Peruvian Mercy community, including three sisters who live in a convent in Chulucanas where we sisters retired at the end of each magnificently grueling day.

Word went out through the local Catholic network we had set up a clinic. As the patients arrived each was weighed and then directed to one of the doctors who waited with translators. Adolescent girls were directed to Mercy Sister Susanne Ashton, an obstetrical-gynecologist; those with heart disorders to Dr. Rufus Jennings, a retired pediatric cardiologist. Before they left each visitor had received at least a worm



pill, a blood test and a fluoride treatment.

During a formal welcoming service extended to the North American contingent and the numerous local volunteers on the first full day of operation, the director of the local hospital praised Karen for the contributions to health she has made in the Chulucanas community.

The importance of that care became painfully apparent a few days later when a local hospital denied admission to a five-year-old girl with a life threatening heart condition and an abscessed tooth. Why? The family simply had no money and the hospital had no provisions. The hospital's employees have gone unpaid since January.

Upon Jennings' insistence the hospital finally admitted the child on condition that our medical mission would supply antibiotics, intravenous equipment and even a thermometer.

Heading the group that welcomed us was Sister Margarita Walsh, a Marianist Missionary Sister from Australia. Trained as nurse specializing in infectious diseases, she first arrived in Peru in 1973 and has spent most of the time since then as a stable presence there, adding to her activities the concerns of social worker and mediator. She expressed profound gratitude to the Mercy sisters who she described as "working tirelessly, networking, connecting, providing resources, and smoothing the way" to better serve the people.

Included in the Mercy network are people who are unable to join Karen's medical expeditions, but continue to support her efforts. The generosity of people who encouraged my participation translated into

life changing medical procedures for several children, including three- year-old Juan David Ortiz Rufino, born with club feet and who had never seen a doctor in his life. He walks on the sides of his feet, causing bulbous calluses.

His parents, Juan Carlos Ortiz Yamunaque, 28, and Rosa Rufino Sicupu, 25, borrowed the 12 soles (roughly four American dollars) necessary to travel from their home in a distant village to the pastoral center where our mission had set up a clinic. The couple hoped that somehow, someday, someone in our group might be able to repair their boy's feet.

Karen, who sees so many hardship cases in the countries she visits, selected this child because, she said, she has witnessed the consequences of this kind of neglect. She said she remembers an adult whose club feet led her to walk the way the young boy does now. In time she lost her small toe, then the others, from the constant scraping.

Juan Carlos' mother, a two-month- old daughter at her breast and six-year-old daughter at her side, trembled and wept when Schneider told her that money from the United States would pay for the surgery needed to reform her son's feet.

The boy's father's eyes filled with tears as he expressed his overwhelming gratitude to those who will make this happen. He owns no land and but serves as a day laborer for those who do, earning about eight to ten soles a day.

Schneider told the parents that the operation would take place in a hospital in Piura at the hands of an excellent orthopedic surgeon.

"Is this really going to happen?" asked the boy's mother seemingly incredulous to the idea.

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Schneider assured her that all would be arranged, adding that by Christmas, "your little boy will be walking normally."



As news of the promised, fully funded operation sank in, the parents became quiet, amazement shining in their eyes.

Schneider's own eyes teared up as she spoke with the parents. Seeing this kind of joy has motivated her to bring medical care to the needy on thirty expeditions to Haiti, Guyana, Uganda, the Dominican Republic and Peru.

D'Arienzo is a Mercy sister and former elementary school teacher and college professor who for a time served as the president of her community, the Brooklyn region of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, and as the president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

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