

Mexico 2016

First thing we want to do is to give thanks to our Heavenly Father for all of you. If you are receiving this summary of our trip to Mexico, you contributed in some way and made it possible. Thank you so much for your generosity and your love of what happens there.

It seems that the miracles start happening before we even leave. A few days before we left, Ramon got a message from Karina, the sister in San Quintin that's been helping us with our family gifting list. She said that there was a family she was really worried about that is on our list. She said there was a really really bad situation going on with this family, but didn't want to go into details. She just said that it's very difficult and they are deeply concerned about the children. The wife kicked the husband out of the home and we can only assume she had good reason. The family recently moved back from Chihuahua, Mexico, and they have nothing. She said the children will literally get nothing, and there are 6 kids in the family. So we said we'd look out for her. Her name is Cecilia.

Ramon shared this about the situation - "I talked with Mary, my sister. Her son Nick is the one doing the eagle project for the Christmas gifts. They've had great response from their ward members and it's been a fun event for them. There was one family that went a little over-board. The Turleys didn't really stick with the 3 gift rule and really got a lot of nice gifts for each person on the list and went the extra mile. When we got looking at the list of families, we noticed that the Turley family, had adopted the family of..... Cecilia, the lady who most needs someone to go the extra mile for her family. Out of 37 families isn't it interesting that the over-achievers got the one family that needed them. It's fun to see the little details and how they seem to work out."



December 21st found us finishing up the packing and stacking and we were off on the first leg of the trip. As we drove, we could tell by the melting snow and ice on the motorhome, we were headed south. We pulled into the Circus Circus campground in Las Vegas that night and got a good nights rest.

December 22nd, we drove to San Diego. We needed to arrive there in time to change some dollars to pesos and do some last minute shopping. Weather was terrible and the down pour of rain had made traveling difficult. Everyone in our group was trickling in to San Diego when they could, and we were grateful everyone was safe.

We crossed the border on the morning of December 23rd, only after we all met together. Mary and Jeff had all the gifts in their truck, and needed to distribute some of it in the motorhome. We take as many precautions as we can, so the border crossing

will go smoothly. This year was the smoothest we've ever had it. More prayers answered. The Hall family and the Edwards family crossed first, with no problems, they just drove on through and continued on to San Quintin, since Justin has been there before. Heiss family and Megan Jackson crossed without incident, and pulled over to wait for us, to travel together. Lloyds crossed and were flagged over and asked some simple questions, then were excused to proceed on their way. They waited for a few minutes, but with the help of Google Maps, went down the road. We got the motorhome to the x-ray station, and exited the vehicle. The x-ray took a whole 3 minutes and we were back inside, pulling over to wait for the results of the x-ray and if the authorities had any questions for us. We probably waited 5 minutes, and a guard came and told us we were free to go. Amazing.



Heiss family was waiting for us and as we passed them, they pulled behind us and we were off to San Quintin! Reid said of this occasion - "My biggest fear was driving in Mexico.

I hate to admit this, but I was still under the misguided assumption that there were no paved roads in the country and that the entire population was poised to rob me. I was most fearful that the police and military were lawless banditos looking for bribes. To

be clear, it was just like driving in the States, except the road signs were in Spanish. I did have to remind myself that kilometers per hour was different than miles per hour."



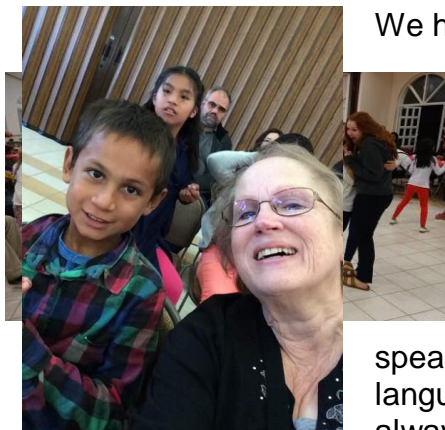
San Quintin is approximately 5 hours south of the border so we pulled into town, and one of our favorite taco

shops by about 3:00 pm. After some lip smacking tacos, we went to get settled. We were staying in the motorhome at the Los Olivos (the olives) campground, and everyone else was staying at the lovely hotel next door, Los Jardines (the gardens). It is called the gardens because the hotel owner cares for his tropical and citrus gardens that surround the hotel. It's gorgeous.



It was so nice to have a well kept, place to stay, where everyone felt safe. While everyone was getting settled, Ramon contacted our old buddy Juan, who has rented a car to us each year. Juan was expecting us. He actually sells cars, but agrees to rent to us when we come to town. Ramon and Randy have built a bit of a friendship with him, and in the past have talked about life struggles and joys. He was excited to share with them that since last year, he is still sober, and now has another grandchild. He thanked us for the good we try to do when we come to his community.





We hopped back in the cars, brought our food assignment (cake), and went to the branch Christmas party at the church. Mexicans know how to party! It was so much fun to see so many faces we knew and now called friends. It was equally fun to see the people who had come with us, meet these branch members for the first time, and experience the love and the fun that happens, even if you don't

speak the same language. It always seems

that the kids figure it out first. They didn't waste any time making friends, playing with balloons, and dancing. The party started off with a talent show, and as a group, we got up and sang a Christmas song for them in English, that Crystal had prepared ahead of time. There were dances and songs, and lip syncs, and the full time missionaries even sang a duet. Josh made a new friend named Armando. We would learn later that Armando and his brother Jesus (hay-sus) made special friends with our friends, Reid and Karen Heiss. While at the party, Karen noticed this small boy who would follow her wherever she went. He wouldn't say anything; he would just follow her. At one point, Karen turned to him and said "Que pasa?" The boy was stunned that she could speak Spanish and just stood there frozen, saying nothing at all. Finally, he ran off. Within minutes, he returned and brought Karen a piece of candy. At which point Karen asked him his name. He proudly responded: "Jesus." Then she asked how old he was. He boldly stated that he was 7. Karen asked if she could give him a hug. His face lit up and he ran into her arms. At this point, Karen was in heaven. Here was a little, poor boy seeing the very first white person of his life and he was filled with love and acceptance. The party continued with food, and then the cake, and then more dancing!



December 24th, Christmas Eve. There's something fun about getting to play Santa. Nick Lloyd made that possible with his Eagle Scout Project. We arrived at the church that morning with the missionaries in the area, and followed Nick's instructions on how to sort the already very organized gifts by family. Then the wrapping party began! There were multiple gifts for every active and semi active member of the branch, young and old, well over 100 people. We felt like we were scheming and planning and

prepping for something really special.



Caleb, who had previously served his mission in San Quintin and had come back with us, came to Ramon and I to make sure a particular family name was right, because when he was serving there, Bro. Mellado was not active, and had in fact, thrown him off his property, and told them never to come back. We asked the missionaries if this was right, and if Bro. Mellado was active, and they said YES. He had been coming for approx. 11 months. He was completely active. Caleb was elated!



Remembering her friends from the party the night before, Karen looked through the lists for Jesus and Armando's family, but couldn't find them. Again we asked the missionaries about them and learned they were investigators. No wonder they weren't on the list! We thought we wouldn't see them again.

We can't skip the fact that Landon was a rock star when it came to wrapping. He never quit!

Later when I asked Josh what one of his favorite things was about our trip, he said, "probably the day we were wrapping presents because of the 64 piece pizza we had for lunch!!! Oh and the fact that I had the toughest wrapping job, I rocked at wrapping the hammer for Nestor."

It took most of the day to get all the wrapping done, and gifts for each family put into bags for delivery. Towards the end of the day a few of the branch members came to help. We needed someone in each delivery group that knew where the branch members lived, so we could take the gifts to their homes. These branch members seemed happy to help, even though this was Christmas Eve. In talking with one of the women, she said she was so grateful to be able to assist us, it was the only thing she could do to contribute to the fact that her kids were going to get any Christmas gifts.



So, a branch member and someone who could translate when with each group, and we were off. Wahoo! Nothing could dampen our Christmas spirit! EXCEPT maybe the condition of the roads. That storm that we hit going to San Diego, well, it had hit here



too and the majority of the roads were dirt.

Armed with gifts and determination, we delivered as many gifts as possible. The missionaries did not go with us, as they were preparing for a baptism that evening. The Lloyds first stop, coincidentally, was the home of one of the guys who was being baptized, and they were hurrying to the church for the service. Next, they came to what Mary described as a mud compound, a house in the front, and house in the back, where two sisters were living. Dirt floors in the home, but those dirt floors were swept and very well kept. All their belongings were in order and it was obvious this sister cared for her



family and home well. When Lloyds came with the gifts, this sister beamed with excitement that they were there. Meagan Jackson translated and told the family that we know how much our Savior loves us, and we love Him too. We wanted to share some of that love with them as we celebrated His birth. Meagan asked Mary if she wanted to say anything, and Mary told this darling mother, "It's an honor to be in your home." The spirit seemed to intensify, and Mary was overcome, as both women, speaking different languages understood the true meaning of Christmas.

One of the families we brought gifts too, had all their kids, and some nieces and nephews gathered for Christmas Eve. We passed their outhouse as we walked by their outside cooking fire, to go to the front door. Their home was one room, cement walls, and dirt floors. The queen sized bed in the corner is where the dad, mom, and 3 kids slept. The other corner had a table and some chairs. The kids jumped around and motioned us to come in, and we sat down and visited for a minute. Ramon asked all the kids what tomorrow was....Navidad! He asked them if they knew the story of baby



Jesus.... Si!!! Then, he asked if they knew what gifts the wise men brought to the baby. Some knew, and the parents helped, as they came up with the answers, frankincense, gold, and myrrh. "Did baby Jesus need gold? He was a baby." Puzzled they said no. Ramon said, "Sure his parents could use it, along with the other things, but why did the wise men bring gifts?" The kids couldn't figure it out. Then Ramon told them, "they brought gifts to show their love, and that is why we brought gifts to you."

Every group that delivered gifts to branch members that night, had tender and loving experiences that brought those who were giving, and those who were receiving, closer to the Lord.

When each group had finished what could be done that night, we met back at the church, where the baptism was taking place. Again, such an amazing way to end a marvelous Christmas Eve.

December 25 was Christmas morning in Mexico. The kids exchanged the gifts they had made for each other, and rummaged through their stockings. As tradition, we Skyped with our missionary from the campground in the motorhome, which completed the feeling of peace and joy, this mother felt on Christmas.

NO SNOW. The clouds had parted and the sun was shining, as we got ready for church which was starting at 10:00 am. We had been asked previously for our group to sing in sacrament meeting. Crystal came through again, and organized us to sing I Am A Child of God, in both spanish and english. The service was lovely, even though many of us were called out of the audience to speak, ha. Yes, it's true. I was the only non-spanish speaker who had this chance, so Randy translated for me. I recalled and shared about when I had noticed one of their son's, who got some candy at the ward party, and immediately went to share it with my son. That boy turned out to be Armando, who I noticed was in the congregation with his investigating family. I also shared about the spirit I felt as Randy and I gave two members a ride to their grandmothers home, the night before, from the baptism. They were the newly baptized member, and the man who introduced him to the missionaries. They told us the story of his conversion, and when we reached our destination, they asked if we would pray with their family. All the aunts, and uncles, and cousins were there, most of them non members or inactive, but clearly valued family. I could tell they loved each other very much. I shared my testimony in church of that spirit of family, how much I loved my own.



Sunday afternoon found all of the gringos back at the campground for a Christmas meal together. Those who hadn't known each other before the trip were quickly becoming fast friends. We spent the afternoon enjoying each others company, and some really good tres leches cake.

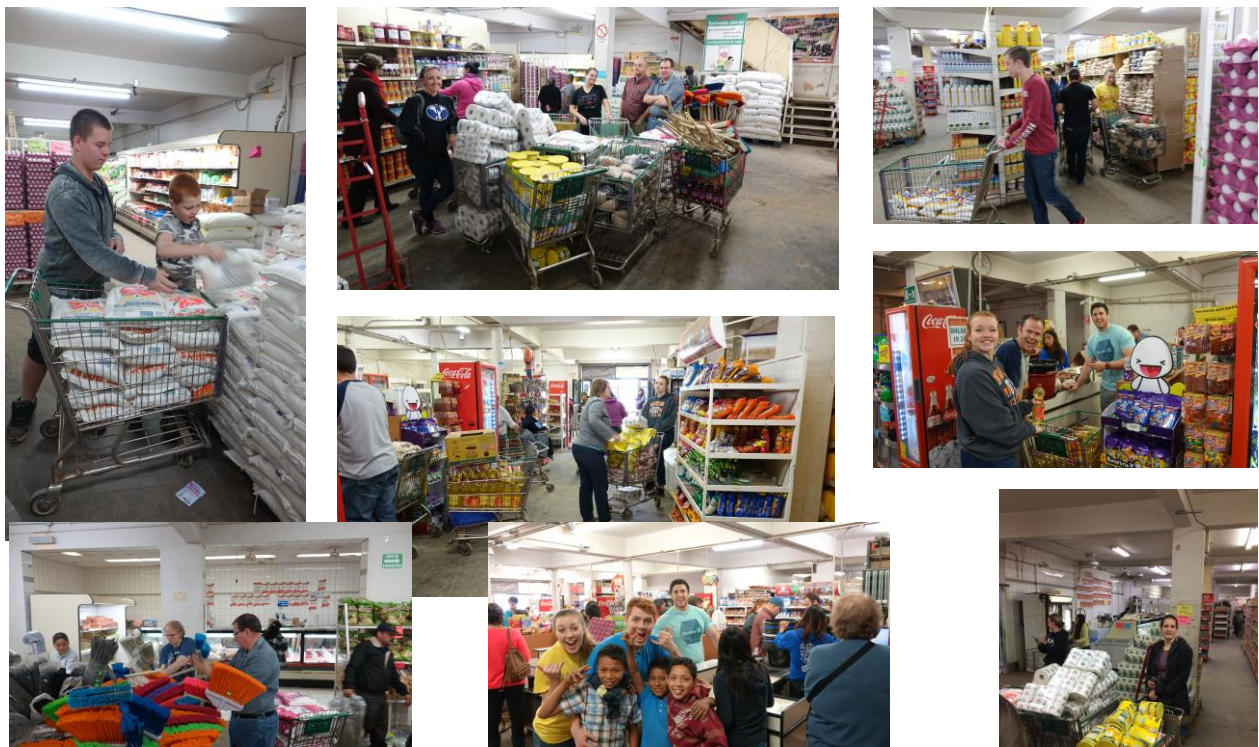


We had been invited to Hermana Leti's home that evening for fresh tamales. Those who wanted to come, battled the lakes we were calling roads and we went to visit. Lots of family was there, and they welcomed us in with tamales and goat tacos. Many of us helped make some fresh tortillas which was a big hit. We walked next door to Leti's mother's home, where it was quieter and we could visit. Luiz, her son in law, who lives in Utah but is from Mexico took that chance to share his gratitude for what we do. Nichole told me that the thing he said, that has stayed with their family, is the fact that he and others he knows from other parts of Mexico, bring their own children to San Quintin, to show them poverty, and to help them to be grateful for what they have. He was so impressed with what we were doing, he admitted he had never thought to do anything to help this branch or town, even though his wife is from San Quintin. He thanked us for being a good example to him.

Leti's mother, Mama Espinoza reminisced about the first year we came, and how Josh fell asleep on her couch. She had fed us a Christmas Eve feast that year, and remembered our visit well. Even though Leti is a member, and former RS president, her mother is a very devout Catholic. As she was talking with Mary, she had tears in her eyes as she told her she could not believe people in America cared enough to do this, especially at Christmas time.



December 26, Monday. The market in town didn't know what hit them!! We showed up to buy enough food staples and supplies to last 25 families for 2 months. Things like flour, sugar, rice, beans, powdered milk, oil, toilet paper, brooms, oranges, onions, and so much more. Up and down each isle, filling shopping carts and extracting curious looks from locals. As we were shopping, Ramon happen to mention to me that today was a good day to be doing the food drive, he had this feeling that there was someone really in need and praying for help. The manager of the store, as well as the cashiers, said they had never, ever seen a purchase this big. Our favorite young boys were there as well, and helped us find what we needed, and load everything in the truck, all for the hopes of a tip. After seeing how hard they were willing to work, we made sure they were well taken care of. It's hard to describe what this was really like, and how fun it was, so I'll let some pictures do the talking.



Next.....Sorting! We took everything back to the campground to sort into 25 piles.

Before our to go food to



we



got in cars, deliver those

in need, we gathered to say a prayer and ask for some guidance. We needed the help of the spirit to know where to stop and what families needed our supplies the most.

Our first stop was for us, the fish taco joint, since by now it was past lunch time, and everyone was hungry. So we went to see what the catch of the day was, and have a bite. Along with the fish, the taco shop fisherman had caught an octopus in their nets, so it was on the menu that day. Hmmmmm, to eat it or not to eat it.



As we were eating, Josh's little friend Armando came in. He was walking by the shop and saw us inside and came in to say hello. We offered him a taco, he smiled and accepted. Who would have thought we would run into him again! Karen asked if he had ever seen this many white people at once, and he said he had only ever seen 1 before. Wow. Armando left and walked home, but a few minutes later he returned to tell us his Grandma wanted us to come visit. He said she lived nearby and he would take us there. Reid, Karen, Halls, and Edwards took him and went to go visit for a minute. When they arrived, they noticed that this was a very, very poor family. But, they were happy to see us and very glad to be investigating the church. They visited for a few minutes but knew they had to get back to start our food delivery.

We split into 2 groups, and each of us went to opposite ends of the rough part of town, to the subdivision ironically named Paraíso or Paradise.



Even though the sun was shining, the roads were still very muddy from the storm, and driving was tricky. We looked for homes that had signs of children, either kids playing outside, small clothes on a laundry line, etc. The first home where we stopped was very humble.

Plywood home, and dirt floor. Not water, no heat. The grandmother was there watching her grandkids, as their parents had gone to report and try to find their car that had been stolen the day before. Though the days warm up nicely, the nights are cold. Which is why they seemed more than excited for the knit hats and gloves we had, for all the children. Oh their cute faces as we put hats and gloves on them!

Another home was partially built of mud, and partially built out of cardboard, which was covered in plastic. They had used water bottle lids, as washers with the nails to hold up the walls. Their plastic roof was held down by strings and bricks. This home had no water, no heat, no power, and a pit in the front yard for their garbage. It was very sobering to see 5 kids and this mother in this small space. As Ramon asked the mom if we could give them some food, she graciously invited us in. We all couldn't fit. She welcomed us to her home, and said she knew that it wasn't much, but was excited because she and her husband were working hard, and they were improving.

"My husband knows everything there is to know about growing tomatoes, and even though we don't have much, we are making progress." There was such a great feeling at this home. We asked what their dogs name was, and the mother seemed a bit embarrassed but then said, Gringo. HA!! We all laughed!!



The other group had some great experiences too, but one that stood out to all of them. They all talk about '**that mother.**' **That mother** was so kind and humble, and soft spoken. When they explained what they were doing, **that mother**, was almost in shock, and had tears streaming down her cheeks as they brought the food and supplies into her home. She turned her loving eyes to Nichole, Crystal, Karen and Meagan and asked Caleb to tell them something very important. "God sent you to my house. God sent you. Thank you. I've been praying for you to come. We don't have any food, and I have 2 small children, I didn't know how I was going to feed them." Tears came to her eyes as she continued, "My husband has left to find work in another town, I don't know when he will return. I prayed you here. God sent you." Now everyone was emotional, and the spirit could be felt so strongly. What an amazing experience to be the Lord's hands this day.

That group had one more pile of goodies for a deserving family, and Karen knew just where to take it. They drove back across town to Jesus and Armando's home. Reid told of this visit when he said, "They had no idea we would return and were equally



surprised that we came bearing gifts. As it was now nearing sunset, all members of the family were home. But most important to Karen, she had a chance to not only say goodbye to Jesus, but to provide their family with gifts. The family was quite surprised and Jesus was overjoyed. We spent several minutes talking with the family. We encouraged them to continue to investigate the church. We can only hope that our several meetings and the pure love of Christ shown by all of our group would have a lasting, positive impression and help them think kindly about the church and its members.” These were certainly new found friends, who seemed to have a connection, even though we had all just met.

Nichole described this day as one of her favorites, the need is so raw, the gratitude is so complete and the experience is tough to articulate. Memorable too was the pain she felt that she couldn't help everyone. So much joy.

December 27th was Tuesday, our last day in San Quintin. It started with breakfast at the home of one of the branch members. The Saldana family is one that was more well off than most of the branch, and they wanted to thank us for the help we have brought to the branch. He referenced the



church's campaign to #LightTheWorld, as he talked to all of us. "You will probably never know how much light you have brought to the world of the branch members in San Quintin. Gracias."

We broke a piñata together with them, and it was obvious they had done that before!!



Time to go to the orphanage. These kids are actually doing well, they are well cared for and are being educated. This is a chance for us to cut loose, have some fun, and give these kids a chance to do some things they don't ever get to do. As soon as we got there, one of the girls remembered Ramon from last year. She climbed up in his arms and promptly went to sleep. We played games in the gym. The game, 'Balloon tied to your leg - try to pop everyone else's - keep yours from getting popped', was a favorite. Soon after, the younger ones liked blowing bubbles, and the older ones played partner tag.





One thing that stood out to Megan during these games was the contrast to how well these kids seemed to be functioning, yet comprehending their lives and their situation. She was visiting with one young girl and asked her about herself. The girl explained that she and her older sister were living at the orphanage. She had a mom, and more younger siblings, but they couldn't afford to take care of everyone, so they dropped them off at the orphanage. She said her mom used to visit, but doesn't anymore. Megan said the girls have come to terms the fact that their mom gave them up.



They always love the ice cream party. They never get it, as ice cream is expensive. One gallon costs about the same as one days wage. So, you can image when we showed up with 13 gallons of it. Squeals of laughter and kids coming back for seconds was so much fun to see.



Then the books!!!! Karen had been gathering spanish books all year. We were able to bring them out, and let the kids choose which ones they wanted. Since they have all been learning to read, they all clamored for what might be their favorite. They seemed to love the books as much or more than the ice cream!!

Jeff took this chance to sit down with one of the girls and read to her. She listened intently. When he stopped, she would point to it and motion for him to read it again. Over and over he read it to her. Then, when she motioned for him to read it yet again, he pointed to the page and said, “you read it,” wondering if she would get it, since she didn’t speak english.



She shrugged her shoulders and started to read it to him, in english! He laughed, and she laughed and thought it was so funny she was able to trick him for a little while.

That evening after a lovely meal at the Old Mill Restaurant, we were driving around and somehow spontaneously decided we all needed ice cream. The ice cream shop had flavors you don’t usually see in the US, so this was an adventure. Coconut, Quava, etc. As we were getting our treats, Caleb said he was going across the street to the bread store, he wanted to buy some baked desserts and pastries. We waited, and when he came back he was out of breath and so excited. “Guess what guys?!” While I was at the bread store, the shop owner looked at me and asked if I was with that group of Americans that brought food and supplies to Paraiso yesterday. I told her yes. She said that her extended family was one that got some food. She



started to tear up and kept saying thank you, thank you. She told me I could have whatever I wanted from her store for free. She said it was the only way she could think to let us know how much it helped.”

When we got back to the motorhome, everyone was there! They had been waiting for us. We have had so much fun together, and we all knew this was our last night, and no one wanted it to end. SO, we packed all of us in the motorhome and played games until late into the night.



December 28th, each family left at different times, to get back to the border. Each family had their own needs and schedule to attend to, so we ended up being the last ones to leave San Quintin for the drive north. After a stop at Mimi's for another tres leches cake for the road, we were off.

We stopped in Ensenada for souvenirs, and met the Stake President in that area. Turns out, Caleb's father had served his mission in this same area, years prior, and had baptized this fine man. Caleb had left his car with them at the beginning of the trip, and rode with us in the motorhome. We had the chance to go to dinner and a movie with their family and talk about some possible wards or branches in the Ensenada area that may be in need of some of the things we do, should we ever want to expand.

Coming home is always a bitter sweet. We leave behind a piece of our hearts each time we go, and count ourselves lucky to have friendships in San Quintin. Some of our group members had some final comments, I'll include them here.

Nichole - This was another great time in San Quintin, filled with so many great stories & experiences! We made new friends, We met wonderful people & in the process of serving, we were once again the ones being served!

Crystal - We just got back from Mexico where we had the best Christmas ever! I struggle to put into words how I feel about what we experienced. It was incredible, humbling, uplifting, fun, enlightening, and left me with an overwhelming feeling of love for the people of San Quintin, and also for everyone who traveled down there with us. We went down there to give and serve, but came back having received so much more.

Caleb - This Christmas was unique to say the least. Instead of presents and gifts, I went with a group to do humanitarian aid in Baja California. Pretty much, we were Santa Claus for 82 orphans, 42 random families and over 100 people that attend our church in that rural farming town. It was amazing, we had the opportunity to do so much good and help others. One thing I got out of all this is THAT is the true religion: Service to others. Seeing others not as they are but as they can become. Compassion. Hands down, best Christmas ever!

Megan Bennett - I had the most amazing Christmas this year! I got to serve in Mexico and give to those who are less fortunate than I am. It was extremely humbling to witness the happiness of those who literally have nothing. I am so grateful for this eye opening opportunity and for the spirit of service that was felt!

Cami - One of the reasons I loved going to Mexico this year was because of the people who came with us. They were all such great examples to me and people I will always look up to. Also, seeing how those people in San Quintin are so happy, even though they have a very simple life. I love being a part of the hand of the Lord in helping them. It reminds me how very blessed I am in my life.

Heiss' - The miracle of this San Quintin experience was that, for one brief shining moment, a group of 27 people from different backgrounds and experiences was able to give of themselves. Yes, it required each one to stretch a bit and to leave behind their comfort zones. But we did it! Maybe the lives of those we touched will be changed, maybe not. But I am convinced the lives of those who participated were greatly enriched by the opportunity to serve.