



ANDREW SAENZ | GREEN VALLEY NEWS

Dr. James Hayes of Green Valley examines 19-month-old Valeria Ramon at St. Andrew's Children's Clinic on Thursday.

Miracles in Nogales

I was holding it together fairly well at St. Andrew's Children's Clinic on Thursday until I saw the walker next to the wall.

It looked just like any walker you'd find in Green Valley, only this one was built for a 3 year old.

That's when it hit me hard and I had to take a minute to get my head back in the game.

St. Andrew's monthly clinic in Nogales, Ariz., gives birth to lots of stories worthy of tears. But on clinic day, there's just no time to get caught up in it all.

There's work to be done, and lots of it.

St. Andrew's has been around in one form or another for about 40 years. In 1973, a group of Mexican women across the border in Nogales were desperate to find help for their disabled children. Their efforts, which eventually shifted north to St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Arizona, have served thousands of northern Mexico's neediest children.

Every month, about 250 kids with everything from spina bifida to blindness, cerebral palsy and prosthetic limbs, come to the free clinic for help.

They share at least three realities: They come from dirt-poor families; they have severe disabilities; and they live in a nation that either can't or won't help them.

All of the people I spoke to on Thursday were too kind (or busy) to stick it to the Mexican government, but suffice it to say that as the money trickles down through their system, the people at the bottom are left empty-handed. That's how most of them end up in the United States for a day seeking help.

And that's what I watched unfold on Thursday: Highly organized chaos in nearly every room of the church.

In a long hallway, a diet specialist was giving advice in halting Spanish to a young mother whose daughter recently had cleft palate surgery; in the sanctuary, one volunteer was dispensing glasses while another taught a blind teenage boy how to use a Braille typewriter; one room was devoted to kids being fitted for prosthetics as speech therapy went on in another.

All of that barely scratches the surface of what's done every month at the clinic.

Many of the young parents have sold whatever they have to buy bus tickets to the border. From there, they're brought by bus or van to the church where they wait, often for hours, to be seen by doctors (who take a day from their practices), dozens of volunteers, and, often, University of Arizona medical students who get a front-row seat to the real world.

The toughest cases – those needing surgery – are referred to Shriners hospitals in Spokane and Sacramento. Those hospitals trade off sending a doctor down for the clinics.

At some point, Executive Director Laura Romero finds a few minutes to meet with me.

She was diplomatic and direct as I tossed out at least one uncomfortable question: Do you think people are reluctant to donate to a non-profit that benefits people from outside the U.S.?

"For me, they are children,

and children have no borders," Romero tells me.

If you're trying to read a political statement into all of that, you'd be dead wrong. It's all about the kids and meeting their needs.

St. Andrew's has no time for philosophizing or politics. Everybody attending the clinic has a visa to get across the border, and at the end of the day, they go home.

Dr. James Hayes lives in Green Valley and has been involved with St. Andrew's for six years; he just finished a term as board president.

Like a lot of non-profits, he says they could use some help. Here's the rundown:

- About 92 percent of every penny donated to St. Andrew's goes to patient care. There are hundreds of people involved but just three paid staff (including a Green Valley office).

- They get their money from private donations, foundations and churches.

- They could use volunteers for just about anything. Retired doctors and nurses, office help, anybody with experience in audiology or speech therapy, and, as Hayes says, they need "the people who help make things go." That means you – everything from cooking lunch to updating records to keeping the siblings of the young patients busy with games and puzzles. They also could use help far more often than just on clinic day.

- A huge need is driving families to and from the Tucson airport when they need to fly out for surgery.

Most of the volunteers come from Green Valley and Tubac, so there's a good chance you know somebody who's helping already. Green Valley is filled with terrific and effective non-profits; this one is worth adding to your list as you consider where you'll share your time and talent.

If you're interested in donating, I bet they'd take your money, too. Medications alone run \$16,000 per month. Fewer "free samples" from doctors are available these days, meaning the non-denominational non-profit is carrying more of the burden. In fact, they can't meet all the medication needs.

At the end of the day what made the biggest impression on me? It was the parents – parents just like me who want to help their children but who have few options in their backward country. Parents whose every hope rests in a clinic run on a shoestring budget out of a small church a couple miles north of the border.

There are some great things happening there, but there's always room for one more happy ending.

— Dan Shearer

Want to help?

- St. Andrew's Children's Clinic is holding a fund-raiser dinner Feb. 18 at the Tubac Golf Resort, featuring a menu by Chef John Wooters. Tickets: \$75; table of eight for \$1,000. Info: 648-3242 or 591-1710.
- Locally, St. Andrew's could use help in its Green Valley office. Call Diana Ward at 648-3242.
- Online: Watch videos and see a slide show from St. Andrew's at www.gvnews.com