

In our town and our region there are Guatemalan, Mexican, Eastern European, Palauan, and other immigrants who, because of the May 12 raid and the closing of AgriProcessors, are struggling mightily to stay warm, fed, and safe. Each day I hear stories of troubles and injustices, of these people's resilience and faith, and of the incredible kindness and generosity shown to them by the people of NE Iowa. Here is one of those stories.

Many Doses of Kindness

A Northeast Iowa Christmas Story, 2008

By Liz Rog

Last night I was in bed when the phone rang at 11:30. It was Juan, the brother of Gabriela, calling from Postville. He said, in a sad and frightened voice, that Gabriela's headache was so bad that she was going crazy, that she couldn't bear it anymore. I don't know what people do about such things as agonizing headaches, but I knew that since this call for help had come to me I had to think beyond my own experience and make something happen for her. What do people do when they need help and have no money? I called the hospital in Decorah to ask for ideas and learned that they turn no one away. I paused in gratitude for this moment of human justice, the first of many I would witness this night. I phoned Juan and we made a plan to meet right away at the entrance to the hospital.

Gabriela has suffered from headaches for five years, ever since she walked across Guatemala and Mexico with her husband Fidelino, their three year old daughter Alison, and her brother Juan. They crossed the Rio Grande through the deep water at night, with Alison on her father's shoulders and the Coyote (a human smuggler who charges \$4-7,000 to get undocumented people across the border to the US) managing the rest. They left behind their "aldea," a group of about seven houses deep in the mountains, where they and their ancestors had lived for generations. The carrots that their families used to grow and sell in the nearby town no longer brought a price that could sustain their meager lives. The tin shack that was their home appears, from the photo Juan showed me one day, to measure about seven feet by five feet.

Their son Dayton was born in Postville three years ago. Fidelino had the good luck of not being at work the day AgriProcessors was raided, and later to find a different job at a ranch in Allamakee County. Two months ago when he arrived at work he walked into a sting operation and since then has been in Iowa prisons. It is not known how long he will be there. Phone calls cost 50 cents per minute, the prison is in Cedar County, Iowa, and Gabriela cannot visit him because she has no legal ID. Meanwhile, she suffers from these unbearable headaches, Alison has asthma, and Dayton has rotting teeth that need to be extracted. Juan moved in with his sister to help with the children since she is so often incapacitated by her headaches.

They have no income and do not know how they will proceed; to go back to hunger in Guatemala is hard to fathom, and they don't have the money to get there anyway. Also, they fear leaving Fidelino behind in the prison system, though it is more than difficult for them to help him in any way, with no money and the mountainous language barrier. They live day-to-day, hand-to-mouth, and here in Iowa, winter's cold and isolation has just begun.

We met as planned at the hospital entrance, parked our cars and walked together to the emergency entrance: the four of them, Dayton sleeping, Alison wide awake and clinging to her wincing mother's hand, a friend of Juan's, and me. There was sadness and fear that walked with us. As we approached the receptionist in the quiet, cavernous entryway, I felt small and powerless with them; I have rarely been to a hospital, and don't feel familiar and knowledgeable in that setting. I'm not used to going places where I don't know people's names and they don't know mine. I would need to rally, to put aside my discomfort so that I could do whatever was needed for Gabriela.

I have to admit, I expected the receptionist to be unkind. I expected her to frown, at least subtly if not overtly, at the non-paying customers who dared enter this hospital after already illegally entering the country. She proved me very wrong, and I felt my eyes well up at her simple kindness. She showed no judgment, and she was not bothered by the need for translation of all she said and heard. Beside the receptionist sat the nurse, waiting to take us to the examining room, seeming both patient and eager to help. I melted into their helpful and knowledgeable hands and began to trust that we were all here to help Gabriela.

The nurse's name was Diane. Gabriela, Alison, and I went into the exam room with her. Diane asked if the light bothered Gabriela's eyes, and when the response came in the affirmative, Diane proceeded with her work by dim light, leaning into her clipboard to see what she was writing. She was slow, gentle, and kind. You would have wanted her to be your mother: sturdy, wise, and good. Gabriela may have been in no position to notice, but I did and I know Alison did too. I paused again in gratitude.

Diane determined that Gabriela would need to change into a gown, because there were respiratory problems too and the doctor would need to listen to her lungs. Gabriela preferred to undress without either of us in the room, so we left and closed the door. I crouched against the wall just outside the door because there was no chair nearby, and so I heard the whimpering and crying in the room as she changed...I winced to hear it. I learned that cries of pain in the Mayan tongue are very different than those in English speakers, even though there are no words. I felt that I was hearing something ancient and foreign. And unspeakably sad.

When she had finished changing, Alison came out to get me. Her face looked bright and intense. She is eight. I am a mother and I am a daughter, and I know what she was up to: she was trying to be strong for her mom, and she was trembling with fear and sadness. She only cried once the whole night, during one of the many times when Gabriela banged her head with her fist, trying to drive the pain away. Alison put her hand between the fist

and the head to soften the blow. Gabriela called out for her father back in Guatemala. She proclaimed that she couldn't go on any more. She cried and cried. Alison stood by her side through it all.

The doctor came in; it was Dr. Bakken, my old friend! Well, I guess we've never shared a meal or an event, but I think of him as a friend. He was our family doctor when the girls were small, his daughter Anna was one of their first babysitters, and long ago his wife was on the board of directors for the co-op, where I work. I was so happy to see him walking into the dark of Gabriela's room. He knew some Spanish too; what a gift of respect and kindness to her!

He gently asked her some questions – mostly in Spanish – and did a simple exam. He told me that most of the pain in her head seemed to be muscular, which suggested both stress-related pain and also could be a migraine. He quietly acknowledged, in English for only me to hear, that surely the intense problems of her life after the raid could be contributing a lot to this pain. Please note that he was not saying anything remotely related to "it's all in her head." He was wisely naming the connection between mind and body, and at the same time showing compassion for her plight. He wondered aloud about the beliefs in Guatemala with regard to mind/body connection, and wished that he knew so that he could determine if it were appropriate to talk about it with her. A culturally sensitive doctor that believes in the power of thoughts and feelings to affect our health – what more could we have asked? Pause with me here again, in amazement and gratitude.

Alison asked if there might be something to eat. I brought the question to Diane, and saw her searching her mind to find a way to say "yes." When she did say it, I saw proof that I now trusted and respected her completely: I thought she was about to offer her own food. As it turns out, there is a small kitchenette with food for staff, and she asked the paramedic there at the station to bring the children back there to get some cereal and juice. He walked Alison, Dayton and the two men back, and I accompanied them to translate. I watched in awe as he took every possible step to take care of them: offered them everything there was to eat, gave choices in cereal and juice, opened boxes and poured in cereals for them, offered it to the men as well, and carried it all to the staff breakroom for them. I can't remember for sure, but I could almost say that he pulled out the chairs for each of them – that's how respectful and attentive he was to them. And as he and I left them there in the room, he said "you can just leave the stuff there when you're finished – I'll clean it up later." I translated those words for the two young Guatemalan men, with their baseball caps on backwards, with faces that some people expect to see on posters in the post office, and they said "thank you," in broken English, and smiled such sweet and gentle smiles of gratitude. The paramedic smiled back at them. I sighed and felt my heart shift and murmur again.

Back in Gabriela's room we awaited the shot of narcotic and tranquilizer that Dr. Bakken had decided he would give her to allow temporary relief from the pain. Alison came back, and Diane came in with the injection. Alison watched it go into her writhing mother's hip (I couldn't), and then we settled in to wait the 20 minutes it was supposed to take to have effect, after which the pain would be gone for eight hours, allowing her to

sleep some. Diane asked whether she was warm enough or needed another blanket, and brought in a blanket that had been warmed. She tucked it around Gabriela, and then Alison climbed into the narrow bed with her mother and Diane re-tucked them together. I left them there alone for a while and went out to talk with Diane and Dr. Bakken. I told them a little about the family's situation: Fidelino in jail, no income, many days without food, health problems throughout the family, no English, no prospects back home, no idea what the next day would bring. And, as always when I tell a bit of their story, I had to stop and note that this is just ONE family among the hundreds who are our neighbors in Postville. Just one, whom I happened to have met. I stopped myself from talking, for I felt I risked saying so much as to be unbelievable. We stood there in somber silence. Why do I have this fear that people won't want to hear too much? The facts prove that wrong, again and again. People recognize something in the stories they hear, something that they can understand and care about deeply. People are so good!

I went back in with Gabriela, and Alison left for a while. Alone with Gabriela, still moaning and begging for relief, I searched for something to do to help her. I tried everything I knew and also didn't know: I massaged her feet and hands, soothed her face, tried pulling away the pain with my hands and mind, sang to her, and prayed for her. I even asked her permission to pray out loud for her, something I have never done before. There was nothing else to do but keep caring in whatever way came to my heart. Eventually she calmed down. Alison was back in the room by then, and we sat there whispering together, holding Gabriela's hands. Alison told me that she speaks Norwegian. "Really!" I said, not believing her because I know she's from Postville, not Decorah! But then she said it: "Velkommen." I asked her where she learned to say that, and found that just today her 2nd grade school class had gone to the Vesterhiem museum. She told me with great enthusiasm about her first impressions of trolls, and wondered how to say "troll" in Spanish.

Do I have to figure out how to tell you the significance of sitting in the dark in a sterile but friendly hospital room with this little Guatemalan girl, with her beginning English skills, saying "Welcome!" in Norwegian, the language of one of the last great waves of immigrants who came to this corner of Iowa? Can we envision what the future will be here for these Guatemalans who, for many of the same reasons as the Norwegians, risked all to come to this foreign place? Will we ever be able to see clearly what possibilities for friendship and mutual enrichment were eliminated by the May 12 raid? Will Alison come anywhere close to realizing her eight-year-old dream of learning to speak English and finishing school, much less of becoming a doctor? How can there be any justice for her, either here or in Guatemala?

Diane came in, ready to administer a small additional dose of the drug since in 45 minutes Gabriela still had no relief. She found us there in silence, with Gabriela sleeping, and so there was no need for another injection. She and Dr. Bakken told us that when we were ready Gabriela should get dressed and go home to bed. We woke her and Diane asked her permission to help get dressed. Gabriela was dizzy, but more calm. Diane put her into the wheelchair to take her out to the car. Dr. Bakken leaned close to her and said in Spanish that he hoped she would feel better, and that he wished her well. He finished

with a warm "Feliz Navidad" – Merry Christmas. This may seem an odd thing to say to a person half-asleep and half in agony, but I took note to remember such a simple thing to say at a time like this. Maybe a little normality, a little imagining of a bright pleasure based on pleasant memories, could bring some small measure of comfort.

We began moving toward the car, a small procession through an otherwise vacant emergency room. We were still a sad group, but we were also changed by the three hours of complete care that had been freely and lovingly given. As we passed through the last door out of the hospital, Diane, pushing the wheelchair, leaned over to me and whispered a question: would it be ok if she gave Gabriela a little money?

My reply was delayed as I took in what was happening and caught my breath: the nurse was going to give some of her money to this stranger whom she would probably never see again. "Oh yes..." I said, haltingly, not wanting to seem too enthusiastic, not wanting to embarrass her or call attention to her goodness in the way that would come naturally to me. I tried to become invisible, to not notice what happened, to let it be between Diane and Gabriela, though neither spoke a word of each other's language, and it was dark, and Gabriela was hardly there.

But I did see. I saw, just as Juan reached to help Gabriela out of the wheelchair, Diane stuff into Gabriela's limp hand a wad of bills that she had ready in her own hand. I don't know what it was that took me over the edge – the quick motion of Diane's hand as it touched Gabriela's, or the fact that I could see that they were \$20s, not singles as I suppose I had imagined they might be. Or maybe it was the accumulation of three hours of stories of good people helping, which were overflowing in my heart and mind as I tried to remember them all for you - from the original miracle that they could take her in, to the warm receptionist, to the dim lights, to the good Diane, to the gentle Spanish speaking doctor, to the cereal and juice friend, to the Christmas greeting...

At the moment I saw the bills slipped into Gabriela's hand, a cry came up from my heart and moved out through my body in the form of a wail. I knew that there was more coming, because it was throbbing and pulsing up through me in the ancient way that has no language other than tears and cries. I didn't want to frighten the children so I turned away, hiding behind the brick pillar there and crying into my fist. So much beauty, so much pain. So much suffering, so much kindness.

They drove off in the dark toward Postville, and I stood there watching the receding lights, knowing this: we have such potential to take care of each other! But I want to know, what is the formula that came together here and now, in a little hospital and also in our wider community in rural Iowa, so that in spite of all the rhetoric about "illegal people," we can still recognize our common humanity with Guatemalan peasants?

Dr. Bakken knew the proper dosage of narcotic and sedative that Gabriela needed to help her through this night. To be effective against the sickness caused by fear, stress, trauma, pain, hunger, and generations of suffering, what is the necessary dose of kindness? How many will it take to save Gabriela and her family from hopelessness? And for how long

can we make do with these painkillers and tranquilizers, before we finally offer the surgery of policy change - the immigration reform that's desperately needed?

The good deeds we do ring out into the universe, whether they are seen or invisible. We all know this. But now we need them to ring out faster, stronger, louder. There are so very many people doing kind things for our dear neighbors; if we share the stories that we know, they will reverberate in us and call forth even more. Tell your stories.