

Mentor UMC McCurdy Mission Trip Report
Bill Mueller
11OCT2015

Trip Date: 26SEP - 04OCT2015

Host: McCurdy Ministries
Española, New Mexico

Team Members:

Laurie Babcock, Jim Schettine, Melody Mueller, Bill Mueller, Mark Strang, Debra Strang, Charlie Suran, Paula Coleman, Larry Hoon, Rhonda Hoon, Kay Bergen, Elizabeth Feldman, Joan Korenko

This Mission Trip exceeded all my expectations! And I had pretty good expectations even though we are advised to not have expectations as the trip will always be a bit different than anticipated. We did not quite know what we would be working on at McCurdy, but we were open to whatever they needed to be done, and had plenty of tasks to do and ways to serve.

We worked hard, played hard, prayed hard, people prayed hard for us, we praised God with ease, we showed love to the community, and the community showed love to us.

We learned a lot about the McCurdy School and McCurdy Ministries and their deep history. We learned a lot about the town of Espanola, the surrounding communities, Albuquerque, and New Mexico.

I especially want to thank Vickie Luviano, the Volunteer Coordinator at McCurdy, who was always a delight and laughed at all our dumb jokes. She got us set up and taught us the rich history of the area as she is a native of Espanola. She went beyond her duties at McCurdy and guided us in touring the Taos Pueblo and the Rio Grande Gorge. On the Friday evening before we left, Vickie gave us all a cooking lesson making tortillas and sopapillas.

Also sharing our dorm were a group of about 8 women and two men from the Rocky Mountain Women's Group (UMW Conference). When one of the groups's men (Keith Watson) asked us to join them in a Saturday morning Communion Service in the dorm before leaving, I found out that he is the Pastor of the Methodist Church in Longmont, Colorado. Vickie made special homemade tortillas the evening before with us for this Communion Service.

I also want to thank Arthur Nutt and his wife Kathy for their guidance on the McCurdy campus and local area. They also stayed in the dorm with us as long-term volunteers. They have been spending three to four weeks at McCurdy every year and know the place as well as some of the employees. Art especially knows his way around the maintenance buildings and tools. He is a retired band teacher and Texas cowboy, the real deal. He is tough as nails, yet gentle and loving at the same time. You could say the same about Kathy. There was more than one time the movie "City Slickers" came to mind.

Our service work included cement patching sidewalks and potholes, fence repair, trimming bushes and overgrowth (especially along the irrigation canal), moving huge bookshelves, teacher's aide in the classroom, math tutors, helping serve and cleanup in the cafeteria, working on the Campbell's soup labels and box tops, and other office work. Three of our team were tasked with calling the parents of the students regarding filling out and returning forms needed for the state grant for the charter school. This last one was probably not the most fun job, but there were no complaints as they were willing to do whatever needed to be done.

I spent most of my work days on cement patching and running to Lowe's a couple times a day to pick up more cement and other supplies. The money raised in our Mission's dinner fundraiser was used to pay for all of the work supplies. We ended up consuming 70 bags of concrete (80 lb. each) and did the work with pick axes, hoes, and shovels. Great fun in the sun! I especially enjoyed driving the old beat-up pickup truck with its long-throw shifter. This took me back to my earlier days living in the west. It turns out they were really happy to have someone who could drive a manual transmission truck. Charlie also got to drive the old truck as well.

The students on campus were very friendly. They spent quite a bit of time outside and going from building to building. They would greet us on many occasions. It turns out this is part of the McCurdy culture; the students are taught social skills as well as academics.

Laurie got to spend the most time with the kids. Being a newly retired first-grade teacher, she jumped at the opportunity to be a teacher's aide for the whole week in a first grade class. She enjoyed this as she did not have to do the lesson plans but got to work directly with the students.

We learned that the irrigation canal (ditch) that flows through McCurdy is 400 years old and is still actively used for agriculture. There are wooden gates along the canal which are used to water the fields by closing the gate and flooding the area for a short period of time. This is on a schedule for each area. Thursday is McCurdy's day to flood a portion of their property. We were hoping to see that, but it did not happen while we were there.

We learned that Espanola is a melting pot of Hispanic and Native American people, which dates back 400 years when the first Spanish Mission was set up there. This pre-dates Plymouth Rock and the eastern U.S. settlements. The Rio Grande River flows through the center of Espanola (and also manages to visit many of the other cities in New Mexico). There are two Native American tribes in Espanola, historically one on each side of the river. They still hold their own Festivals which feature their native foods (including lamb as a staple). We got to sample some of this at Angeleno's restaurant, again with Vickie being our guide.

We were made aware of one of the other services that McCurdy Ministries provides to the community; Project Carino. This is a faith-based behavioral health center which provides counseling and therapeutic services for McCurdy Charter School students and their families at no charge. It is one of the services that are funded by our donations to McCurdy. They have a therapy dog named Compa whom we met as we were working on cement patches nearby. Compa is the unofficial McCurdy dog. We got Compa's paw prints in the cement to be remembered for years to come, as well as a few of the student's handprints.

We had plenty of time in the evenings and both weekends for sightseeing and taking in the local culture. We visited Petroglyphs National Monument, Santa Fe, Los Alamos, Bandelier Cliff Dwellings, Chimayo Sanctuary Mission, Taos Pueblo, Rio Grande Gorge, Ghost Ranch, and even spent Sunday morning at the Albuquerque Balloon Festival before flying home.

We learned that the Taos Pueblo is the oldest “village” in the US that is still inhabited by the Native Americans. This dates back 800 to 1000 years. The beauty of this place is beyond description (you need to see the pictures).

In the spirit of diving into the local culture, we attended Mass at the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi in Santa Fe on the first Sunday. I found this to be a powerful experience. They also had a service in Spanish, but the group decided to go to the English service. We noted that the vast majority of the northern New Mexico population is Catholic, including most of Espanola and the McCurdy students. Vickie pointed out the one Protestant cemetery a few miles to the north of Espanola and said that is where most of the McCurdy staff were buried.

The McCurdy Charter School and (Methodist) McCurdy Ministries is known as a safe sanctuary in the region, with the Mission School dating back 100 years. Many of the residents we met in the stores and restaurants told us that they graduated from McCurdy. Despite being in a low income area, McCurdy School has one of the highest graduation rates.

When we visited the nearby El Santuario de Chimayó (which is known for healing pilgrimages), we looked up and saw a large cloud in the form of an angel. That was a wow moment. The cloud angel stayed with us for quite some time.

A highlight of each day was the evening devotions. We often found a place with a spectacular view of nature for this spiritual time. Every devotion was different and we often spend more time on them than planned, but nobody minded. After all, we were there to serve the Lord.

With Blessings,
Bill