

Costa Rica 2017



Left to right: Bryan, Steven, Bekah, Dr. Eva, Tony, Mike, Daya, Dr. Gene, and Ernesto

Carlos Gomez, pastor of Iglesia Gran Comisión Costa Rica, came here 12 years ago after his US visa had expired. God put him in San José and the church grew into a beautiful, glass-walled building, and by most standards, flourished. But after a desperate health scare with his son Carlito who was in the hospital for 6 months, Carlos felt the call to serve and reach out to those in extreme poverty and need. The Gomez family moved the church to the inner city red-light district two years ago. Only two couples stayed with them when the work shifted to the front-lines of Christianity. BTW:



Carlito took his college entrance exam on Thursday this week!

When we arrived, Carlos quipped that Costa Rica is the prettiest country in Central America, but that we would be working in the ugliest street in the whole country. It is sort of hard to argue about either statement.



Carlos at the desk with sex workers across the street



View from my window at our host home



View from La Sala where we worked

Economy

Costa Rica did have a European style economy from its former economic success. It has high taxes and fairly good services. Health Care is free, but 1/3rd of everyone's income goes to pay for it, but only for those who are employed. If you do not have a tax-paying job, and you are over 6 or under 65, you can only get care for emergencies. In fact, even if you are under 6 or over 65, and you are supposed to be insured, you could still run into problems. We heard horror stories about the process of getting a pension or receiving public healthcare for the homeless.

In addition, the economy has taken a huge hit lately and is hotly debating taking international funds for the first time. Computer microprocessors were 50% of their GDP, but that is gone – they do not make tablet or phone processors. Plus they are an aging population. And it is the lowest end of society who hurts the most.

Personal Health Insurance Option

For \$70/mo per person, one can buy into the health care system. This may sound cheap, but minimum wage is \$600 per month, again not too bad, but the women we are working with are the lowest of the discarded sex workers. Older, married, and unable to charge what a young sex worker charges, they must see four (4) clients a day to make \$12 which is the minimum they need to survive. Housing costs \$6/night, food, and support for their children use up the rest. Many spend their earnings on alcohol and drugs to cope with their consistent traumatic experiences.

Most of them start their day off desperate for something to eat and must “service a client” first thing in the morning to get breakfast. So the church offers coffee and cookies in the mornings in order for to them start the day differently. As a result, we were able to connect with many of the same people every morning as we served them coffee. This is often the first point of contact with the ladies.

It typically takes 2 years to build a lasting relationship with these ladies, making it a very hard and sensitive process.

When these workers get old, worn out, or their minds have gotten so twisted and



broken from a lifetime of debasement, drugs and abandonment, they move literally down the hill to 8th street where La Sala is located in the old Canada Dry building. These are the ladies God drew us to serve and love this week.



Mrs. G's Story



Mrs G. (in the blue shirt) is the President of the Sex Workers Association of Costa Rica. Two years ago, she told Carlos and his team her story: a man who had been her client for 15 years recently paid all of her debts so she could get out of the life. Carlos and his team focused on the idea of a Bridegroom paying someone's debts to free them, and then told her how Jesus had done just that for her on an eternal scale. She broke down in tears and wept. That message resonated with her, and she gave her life to Christ. She was then baptized, and the Friday before we arrived, she had a real church wedding.

She is still advocating for Sex Workers, but now she shares the love of Christ with them.

The other lady on the right in the picture is Y. The church has helped her leave the life, get a job, and now she runs the Café the church started! She has such a great spirit; it was a blessing to serve with her.

Piñata Factory and Café Zarihuella

It is extremely difficult for a sex worker to get a recognized job after leaving the industry. The CDI, in response, focuses on job skills training and starting businesses that can hire the ladies who desire to leave the life. The goal is for them to be trained, get other jobs, and someone else can take their place.

Why don't they just leave?

V, on the far left in the red shirt, so desperately wanted out of the life that she got a 2 year degree as a medical assistance, another certificate for elderly, another for food handling, another for massage therapy, and many



others and still could not get a job! With no references, no previous job history, everyone assumes she will fail to stay out of the life. She has worked at the Café for the last 9 months. Her 4 children are still separated from her; the government takes them away from everyone in the life. **Now she dreams of being a medical assistant and massage therapist for the elderly!** My new dream is to be part of making that dream come true 😊

We take for granted small motor skills. It can take months to learn the most basic skills – like making pancakes! The government knows how incredible this training is for these women, so they are talking about helping to fund the job training. Unfortunately, the church is losing so much money with these businesses, that they cannot keep them going otherwise. It takes > \$10,000 to train each person. Pray that comes through.

What is Success?

Because of the deep emotional scarring that caused the women to get into the life in the first place and the deep shame and guilt obtained while in the life, the recidivism rate is typically 97% for those who attempt to escape. So far the church success rate is 9 out of 11 succeed! Three (3) have gotten outside jobs and the other six still work at the Café and Piñata factory. The slow, methodical approach and the help of an expert like Mrs. G and her team is bearing much fruit. In addition, there are 20+ more women in a Bible Study at La Sala making progress toward CDI training. Finally, over 300 people per year take some sort of CDI training. Some are 2 day classes, some classes last 3 months. We will be keeping a close eye on the progress from this week to see the impact a medical brigade can have.



“Medical” Situation from the Life

The women were almost all suffering from 5 main conditions:

1. PTSD – initially childhood, plus many on the streets.
2. Personality disorder
3. Daily drug use
4. Self Mutilation – cutting in many cases
5. Suicidal tendencies



In addition, they have STD's, urinary tract infections, and pregnancies, as one might expect.



Image of Steven being a Prayer Warrior much of the week!

Spiritual Warfare

15-20 years in the life is hard to overcome. It takes years and supernatural healing if it is possible at all.



The spiritual battle this week was so intense that it is difficult to put into words. The darkness was incredible, but so was the Light. We found ourselves praying almost constantly.

Our mantra was that as soon as you see anything amiss, even if someone pulls a knife, pray! So we did, not knowing that on Friday, Eric, a guy who had recently killed his girlfriend would steal a big, sharp, shiny, menacing, did I say sharp, kitchen knife. He flaunted it at us when we locked him outside. And still we prayed fervently! Steven was the mightiest of prayer warriors with Mike and Bryan not far behind. Here is Bryan running the pharmacy.



But Transformation Happened

On Monday we had a couple independently accept Christ. The Lord had been working on them, and when we met with them separately, they both surrendered to God's love. He had been clean for 5 months and had a job at an ink factory. So he was able to support them so that she did not have to work on the streets most of the last 5 months.

On Tuesday morning, a woman Mike had seen the day before came back to tell us that after she was prayed for to receive Christ, she went home, called her son and led him to the Lord over the phone. She stood in front of us and it was clear that she was transformed from her clothes to her personality, and demeanor. The dramatic change was an amazing thing to witness. (sorry, no photo)

This picture to the right was pretty typical. All but a few of the women from the street broke down at some point during the Gospel. They all know about Christ and desperately want out of the life. Specifically, we shared with them a story in Isaiah 54:4-8 about God wanting to be their husband and rescue them.



After receiving Christ on Tuesday, the man pictured on left came back Wednesday and said, "look; I'm totally different!" This is a man who killed his step father when he was 12 for abusing him. Unfortunately, his story is not at all unusual. Many of the men we saw during the week had killed someone and all had been in jail. He hugged us deeply each day as he thanked us (obviously, there is a lot more to do). Unfortunately, he did not come to church Saturday (church is step one of following through on their part).

Also on Tuesday, Carlos led a man to Christ who said, "I am not asking for money, but can you send some food to my son?" Carlos replied that he could only pray for him. Wednesday he came back and said that he had gotten a job as a security guard because of Carlos' prayers! He brought a friend and asked Carlos to pray for him too.

Not all Positive

Each day also came with heart wrenching experiences and heaviness. We probably experienced one of the most challenging moments on Tuesday. A 17 year old girl came in to see the doctors because she was pregnant. Mike shared with her, but he was not getting through when she said “if there was a God, then I wouldn’t be here.” Carlos took over with Melannie (one of our translators) and they poured out their hearts to her. She was being offered a shelter and a way out of the streets by a partner organization. The rest of the team was in the kitchen fervently praying for her. In the middle of our prayers, we heard a commotion and looked to see her storm out shouting and in tears. Carlos and Melannie were inconsolable afterwards from the pain of not being able to reach her. Unfortunately, that pain was felt many times this week.

Lots of deep mental illness

Wednesday started off rough with not enough translators. We struggled all morning and had a hard time getting focused. Tony did see one woman probably suffering from Schizophrenia, “the good news is she bought the last shark sold in CR, but it bit her and gave her an infection in her finger” (her story was all over the place). Unfortunately, she was cursing, raving and scaring people, so Tony was able get her antibiotics and some Neosporin ointment, and she left quietly. We chose to laugh instead of cry.



Mike prayed with a couple of people to receive Christ, but with not enough translators, it was tough all morning. In the afternoon, Steven played his guitar in the center of the room, and the atmosphere changed dramatically. One agitated guy just bolted out of the room! The power of worship. Our prayer was that La Sala would be a house of peace this week.



Wednesday afternoon there was a commotion out on the street – “come quick!” Mrs. G warned us not to go out on the street to help because it was too dangerous. Bekah would not be deterred (and she did not understand the Spanish warning), so Tony followed her out on the street to help. Mrs. G came over and warned them again with some concern on her face, “Cuidado, por favor.” Please be careful. Police came and protected



us, but the people of the street seem to have grown to trust and care for us. There really appeared to be nothing to be fearful of – praise God.

Thursday started with J returning just to sit and rest – pictured to the right. God had something totally different in mind. After counseling her for an hour, she gave her life to Christ. Her English was sufficient to act as a translator for the next person. It happened to be a lady that lives at the same shelter (there are 400 beds for the 3000 homeless in San Jose and they must be in line by 4pm, so it is hard to hold down a job). Pray for J to forgive her mother who never showed her love, her ex-husband, who has her son, and for her to use her intelligence (she was a good HS student) to get out of the life she has lived for the last 8 years. She starts at the CDI for skills training soon.



Also on Thursday, two men came in, and Mike got to share with them. One had brain cancer and had only 6 months to live. Mike challenged him on how he wanted to spend that limited time. He said, following Christ, so both men prayed to receive Christ. They cheered like someone had scored a soccer goal after the prayer! The next day one of them returned to give Mike 3 little pieces of fruit to show his appreciation. Their past was interesting – they were Sicarios (mercenaries for drug lords). Of their 22 person team, they were the only two left alive. They had smuggled drugs and killed people, but desperately desired to atone and leave the darkness behind. Nothing is too bad for the power of Christ's forgiveness. That message was needed all week too!



This 12 year old girl was around Thursday and Friday with her family, and her presence in this zone broke our hearts. She is clean and safe right now, but she lives in a place where few girls escape unscathed. Given that she could make \$1000 per night, you start to understand the temptation and how they start.

The day ended with a visit with Natasha. Frankly, Tony was hoping someone else would speak with him, but God said, "cut it out." So we called him over and asked his name. He said, "call me Brian." We said "are you sure, we don't mind calling you Natasha if you prefer," to which he said, "we are going to be talking about the things of God, so I don't want to lie to God." We knew the time would be precious after that. Brian had been on the streets for the last 26 years dressing as a woman, but he grew up in a Christian home from which he ran away at 14. He was not ready to return to Christ, but he received the Gospel with hope and many tears. We went through the Scriptures to learn about the Spirit of immense power, love, and self discipline that would be on his side once he is ready. Tony held his hands, looked into his eyes, and told him how desperately God desired to rescue him from the life he was leading on the streets. It was clear, few if any had ever showed him such dignity and genuine love – it made a difference in ways we may not ever know! The lesson is, "be obedient when God calls us to show His love to someone."



After seeing this family on the left all come to Christ (I just noticed what grandma was doing), Friday morning took on the most oppressive spiritual battle of the week. First, Tony's Bible was stolen along with the big kitchen knife– anything not nailed down gets stolen. So Tony called in every prayer warrior he could find and eventually



he just posted to FB to enlist as much help as possible. Thank you to all who answered that call. One fear was that we would have people angry and maybe

even violent because we were leaving without seeing them, and with suit cases filled with medicines that the whole street knew were there. However, with all of those people praying, God had a different ending in mind.

As we packed the van late Friday night (because seriously who can get Eva and Gene to stop seeing patients?), this man came to the door and asked quietly to speak with Tony for "just a minute." Tony told him that we were packing up and ready to go, he asked again softly to talk for "just a minute." Tony went to get Ernesto to help move him along (drunk or drugged people had been coming up the last hour asking for all kinds of things while we packed). When they stepped outside to give him "just a minute," he asked to sit inside. At which time the Spirit took



over and Tony recognized something special was happening. With everyone on the team praying, in just a couple of minutes, he was accepting Jesus as his Savior. Then Ernesto and Tony counseled him and shared some verses on the power of God to help him get the emotional healing he needed. It is way too easy to get focused on our plan and miss God's. The most common verse we shared was 2 Timothy 1:6-7 which tells us the God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power, love and self-discipline. This is the power they need to overcome their present situation and heal from their past! Heck it is the power we all need to overcome sin in our lives.

Saturday night church

We had three (3) people come to church Saturday night. That is a huge first step.

Patient Summary

We saw a total of 206 patients and 27 people prayed to receive Christ as their Savior. Some others said the prayer, but it was not very clear due to drugs or mental health that they knew what they were doing. To be honest, we had no faith that God would do so much this week, but we do not believe the battle is even really begun for these dear souls. Please join us in praying for each step they must take toward Victory!

Leading up to the trip we were trying to outthink ourselves about how to approach these women. We had to be reminded that God's time-tested pattern from Luke 10:9 works no matter the audience.

"Heal the sick who are there and say to them, 'The kingdom of God is near to you.'"

Luke 10:9 (Jesus sends the 72)

We shared with all of them about the power they will need to escape the streets.

For this reason I remind you to fan into flames the spirit that is in you from the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of fear (or timidity), but one of power, of love, and of self discipline.

The Ablaze Verse - 2 Timothy 1:6-7

The other thing we reminded them was that with that Spirit, they could make the devil flee. So we taught them some basic spiritual warfare to make it to the next day. Everything had to be simple and memorable.

Submit yourselves, then to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

James 4:7-10