

Melrose nurse home from Guatemala with a new appreciation



KATHLEEN MAFFEO, RN, is posing for a photo with one of her patients at the Rio Dulce river basin in the Central American country Guatemala. (Courtesy Photo)

By LIZ JENNINGS

MELROSE — People frequently lose sight of what is truly important in life. Among the chaos of the daily grind they get caught up in life's details. It often takes those who are less fortunate to remind all of us how truly blessed we are.

For Melrose native and resident Kathleen Maffeo, RN, who has recently returned from a trip to the Rio Dulce river basin in Guatemala, this idea is fresh in her mind. (The Rio Dulce river basin is 4 1/2 hours from the international airport in Guatemala City.)

Maffeo is one of nine nurses from Beth Israel Hospital in Boston who participated in an eight day excursion providing medical care to the poor citizens of Guatemala in Central America. According to Maffeo the experience touched her deeply and allowed her the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others.

Maffeo graduated from UMass Boston with a degree in Nursing and has been practicing for three years. Some of that time she spent in Boston but she was also a traveling nurse working in Texas and North and South Carolina before heading to Guatemala.

"The country is absolutely beautiful but the people are so poor; a very small population of the people hold all the wealth. It was culture shock. I realized how much we take for granted: things like taking a hot shower, running out for a gallon of milk or even owning shoes," she explained.

Maffeo and her colleagues worked alongside Bryan and Riechelle Buchanan, the founders

of Jungle Medics. The Buchanans are independent Christian mis-

sionaries. Through their program medical professionals such as Maffeo and non-medical professionals volunteer in the remote villages of Guatemala, helping give medical and dental care to the people there.

Maffeo painted a picture of poverty to its highest degree. She described stray animals that wandered the streets, children with swollen bellies and citizens who had to travel five miles barefoot just to get care.

The average level of education in Guatemala is sixth grade, according to Maffeo, who emphasized how deprived the people there are and told a story about an 80-year-old woman who had never even seen her own reflection. The group was able to make this happen for the woman by

taking a picture of her with a digital camera, allowing her to see herself for the very first time.

The people there do not bathe regularly and live in "barely put together" homes with dirt floors and palm tree roofs, she said. Not even the dogs have enough to eat, Maffeo articulated, and many of the people have never received

any type of medical care at all.

According to Maffeo, through the Jungle Medics the group was able to offer a great deal of preventative care, teaching the villagers things like better personal hygiene.

She noted that they did not see

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the "sick of the sick" because those who were severely ill were not able to make the journey. They did, however, treat things like skin infections, sores, lice, worms, muscle aches as a result of hard labor, headaches and other infections and illnesses for which patients required antibiotics.

"It was tough to leave, a week wasn't enough time. Just as we were getting into a rhythm we had to leave. None of us felt like we were done," she said.

Many of the older women she described as fragile because they have had so many children and

were so deprived of calcium.

Maffeo explained that though the ages of the patients they saw ranged from infant to the elderly, they did not see many old people because the quality of life there is so bad that people don't live very long.

"We saw infants and people in their seventies or eighties, but it was really hard to tell their age. They looked so much older because their bodies have been through so much more," she said.

Maffeo described the experience as extremely emotional at times. She confessed that there

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were multiple occasions in a day where she and her colleagues felt their eyes well up with tears, but they were tears of both pain and joy, she emphasized.

"We were up in 'Lot Six,' an

area that was never given a formal name. I was working at the pharmacy station and two men were giving me hugs and kisses thanking me. No one had ever helped them. It was awesome to help even one person," she concluded.

The worst case that Maffeo saw was a young boy whose heart was so enlarged that his chest was sticking out, she said, saying that in truth that he probably did not have that long to live.

Maffeo hopes to do something like this again in the future. She says she would like to go back to

Guatemala but for much longer this time, expressing that the experience has had a profound affect on her.

"Everyone here (the United States) is used to such a different lifestyle and I realize how much people here have and it makes me appreciate what we have," she said. "I think if you are able to do something like this, you take away from it just as much as you put in. I feel like I came home with more. I love my job and it is nice to come home thinking, 'I've done some good somewhere,'" she concluded.