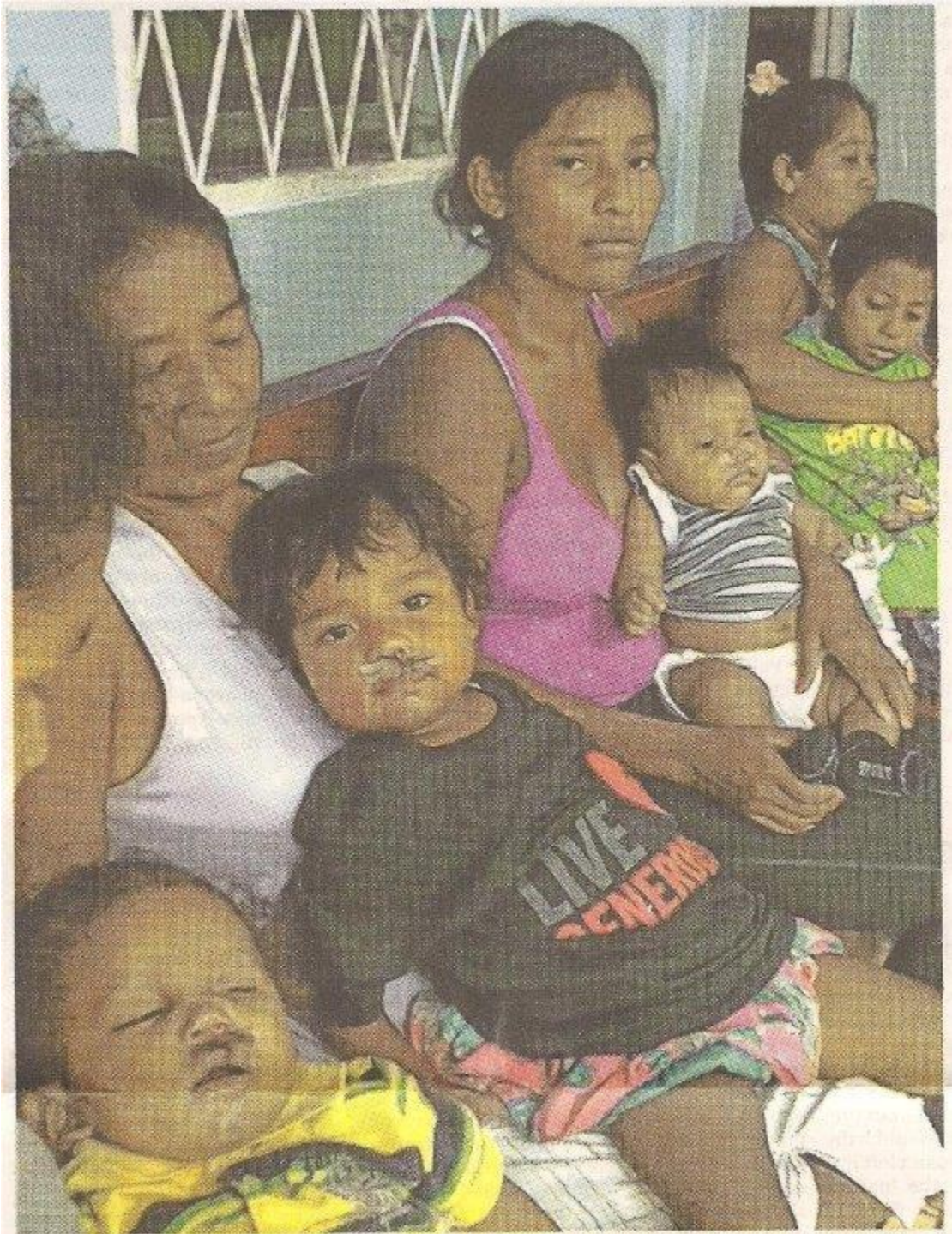


From The Columbus Telegram – April 7, 2016



COURTESY PHOTO

Parents wait to have their children's cleft lips and palates repaired by a U.S. medical team during a recent trip to Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua.

Local couple impacting lives many miles away

Atheys have taken annual mission trips to Central America

TYLER ELLYSON

tellyson@columbustelegram.com

COLUMBUS — Dean Athey, a member of Global Passion Ministries-Nebraska, compares the medical mission team's work to the story of the young boy on the beach tossing starfish back into the ocean.

They may not be able to help everyone, but the group can still make a significant difference in the lives of many.

"The need is endless, but at least you can impact somebody's life," said Athey.

That's what keeps the Columbus man and his wife, Carolyn,

motivated to return to Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, year after year.

They can see the results of their efforts in the development of the poor Central American city and the smiles shown by locals and residents of surrounding villages, some of whom travel for days to receive the medical care.

The Atheys have been teaming up with a Lincoln couple — Karl and Sue Tillinghast, formerly of Columbus — and a second mission group from California to provide medical services in Puerto Cabezas each year since 2010.

Their most recent trip in February included 18 people from the two states who were joined by about a dozen physicians, nurses and translators from Nicaragua for a nine-day stay in Puerto

Cabezas along the country's northeast coast.

Most of the local residents have little to no access to health care, and can't afford the lengthy trip across the country to the capital of Managua, where medical facilities are better equipped to treat health issues prevalent across the area.

This makes the U.S. medical team's mission even more critical, as many locals have come to rely on the group for their annual health care.

A major issue in the area is cleft lips and palates, something health professionals blame on a combination of factors.

The birth defects could be caused by contaminated groundwater, high levels of carbon

Please see **Nicaragua**, Page A2

Nicaragua

From A1

dioxide pregnant women are exposed to while cooking with wood-burning stoves inside unventilated huts and genetics.

In February, the medical team completed 15 procedures on patients ranging from a 2-month-old baby to adults to repair cleft lips or palates — the highest number they've done in the seven years. One family traveled from neighboring Honduras to see the American specialists.

"It's a problem that never goes away there," said Carolyn Athey.

The primary focus is on treating children since a cleft lip or palate can impact their ability to eat and

lead to ostracization.

"They're looked down upon in those villages. People have kicked their kids out of the home just because of that," Carolyn Athey said.

In addition to the cleft lip and palate repairs, the medical team completed about 15 other major operations and around 20 minor procedures such as scar revisions and mole removals. About 100 people showed up for a clinic held on a Saturday at a former open-air army barracks modified to serve as a hospital.

Carolyn Athey described the conditions at the Puerto Cabezas compound as "deplorable" during the first couple of years they visited, but said improvements are being made.

Items such as nicer garbage cans for the hospital and playground equipment and a basketball court for the youths are viewed as significant upgrades.

"There's some progress down there, but not what we see here," she said.

Global Passion Ministries-Nebraska also helped fund a feeding station in the city that provides meals for hundreds of children each day and purchased plastic plates, utensils and cups so they don't have to eat from bags. Additional money will be used to enclose the shelter house with a screen to keep out the flies from a nearby dump.

The group uses monetary donations and money generated by fundraisers in Columbus and Lincoln to help pay for the trips, fund

special projects like the feeding station improvements and cover medical expenses.

Providing medical services in the poverty-stricken city is a high-stress job, which is why next year will likely be the last trip for the Atheys.

At 62 years old, Dean Athey plans on retiring from his job as an anesthesiologist at Columbus Community Hospital in June, but will continue to work at the local surgery center.

He's hoping to see the team continue to make trips to help the people of Nicaragua and believes local physicians can also step up to provide additional health care in the area.

"It's hard to think about that, about not going," Dean Athey said.