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Local

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Faith is her guide; helping others is her mission

Local woman sets up hospital in Guatemala

By Denise Malan (Contact)
Saturday, May 23, 2009

Sara Merdes Judd



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CORPUS CHRISTI — Never tell Sara Merdes Judd "no." She won't listen anyway.

Merdes Judd, now 87, has spent the past 25 years working to bring health care to poor residents of and around Patzún, Guatemala. This, she believes, God asked of her.

Her story recounting those years is full of naysayers and roadblocks, miracles and divine intervention.

A former housewife and food demonstrator, she never had much money. Yet she helped raise enough to build a hospital in Patzún, named Clinica Corpus Christi, dedicated in 1991 and still in operation.

She has no training in medicine or hospital administration. Yet she has secured donations of equipment to fill the hospital and persuaded local doctors to travel there annually to pull teeth and fill cavities, diagnose and treat diseases and operate on patients.

She lost a daughter, 6 years old, to a tragic accident. Yet she finds strength in knowing her daughter is nearer God and praying along with her.

"The faith of Sara is not just some intellectual faith," said the Rev. Bob Dunn, her friend and pastor of Most Precious Blood Catholic Church. "She trusts God is in her life. She will talk to God like you and I are talking."

Friends and family say Merdes Judd is generous almost to a fault. "You have to be careful around her," daughter Margie Postlewhite said. "You can't say, 'Oh, your perfume is so nice,' because she'll give it to you."

But don't mistake her for a pushover. Merdes Judd knows what she wants and isn't afraid to ask for it. And she will tell you exactly what she thinks.

Once, when she was demonstrating food at Sam's Club, a man recognized Merdes Judd from her Guatemalan efforts and gave her a piece of his mind.

"This man came up and said, 'Hey lady, why don't you help the people of the Westside of Corpus Christi,' " she recalled. "I looked at him and said, 'Why don't you? And I'll help you.' He stormed off, and I thought he would go to management. ... He came back and gave me \$5."

Though still feisty in spirit, Merdes Judd is in deteriorating health. The boxes of donations that once cluttered her Topeka Street home are gone, and the parade of volunteers and visitors has slowed. She hardly cooks anymore. There are times when her back hurts so much that she can only lie in bed and pray.

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She won't make it back to Guatemala.

But she hasn't lost her vision for Clinica Corpus Christi, that it will someday become a full medical center, or teaching hospital with specialized doctors.

"Day one, she said it was going to be a medical center," friend and registered nurse Teresa Moreno said. "She said it was going to be a medical center, and everyone laughed. But I believe her."

Finding a purpose

Born Jan. 14, 1922, to Italian immigrants, Merdes Judd grew up in a suburb of Pittsburgh. The Baiardos had seven children, though one daughter died at the age of 6. Merdes Judd said her parents were strong Catholics, but her siblings didn't take to religion as readily as she.

"They used to make fun of me," Merdes Judd said. "So they wouldn't see me, I used to go pray in outside toilets or up on a hill."

She worked as a secretary before signing up for the Army on her 21st birthday, she says, after a fight with her sister over a boy.

Merdes Judd went to Europe with only six weeks' basic training — "I didn't know how to salute properly," she says — and worked at the U.S. Embassy in London. She was sent home when she came down with rheumatic fever, an illness so severe she was bedridden for a year and doctors worried she could never have children.

But God blessed her, she said. She married Carl Merdes in 1946 and moved to Corpus Christi. Her husband helped open the machine shop at Naval Air Station Corpus Christi.

The couple had a set of twin girls, born on Merdes Judd's birthday in 1956, and two other children, a boy and a girl.

Daughter Postlewate, now 60 and living in Mississippi, said she remembers though her father wasn't the most pleasant man, her mother always had visitors, including priests and nuns. She was constantly cooking.

"Nuns in the hospital would call and say they had somebody who just wouldn't eat, but if they had a good loaf of bread (they might)," Postlewate said. "She could take your shoes and make something delicious."

Then, when Postlewate was 13, tragedy struck the family. Twins Janet and Joyce, 6, were at the home of a neighborhood woman who often watched them. Janet had ridden her bicycle, and she pedaled along behind the neighbor's car as the woman was taking Joyce and her children to Merdes Judd's so she could run some errands.

The children in the car were yelling at Janet, just being kids, but Janet didn't see a pickup that came around the corner, and the driver apparently didn't see her.

Postlewate didn't witness the accident, but rode in the ambulance with her mother and Janet. That day was a defining moment for their family.

"Every day before Janet died, Mom would get up in the morning and sing, and she was a happy character," Postlewate said. "After Janet died, for a long time, she was very sad. I remember thinking to myself that we would never have her back with her joy."

But Merdes Judd found renewed life when she went back to work, Postlewate said. She started demonstrating pizzas at H-E-B to save money for a trip to see her first granddaughter, Jana, who was born in Okinawa, Japan. Merdes Judd was adept enough at her food demo work that she was profiled for it in a 1975 "Caller-Times" article.

"When she went to work it was like she was reborn because now she had a purpose," Postlewate said.

God wasn't done with Merdes Judd or her late daughter.

Sign from God

Merdes Judd first traveled to Patzún, Guatemala, in 1984 to see the missionary work of the Rev. Aldo Babuin, a Franciscan priest who had been introduced to her during a trip to Corpus Christi. At the time, Guatemala was deep in a civil war between the army and leftist guerrillas.

Patzún is a city of about 50,000 nestled into the mountains about 60 miles west of the capital Guatemala City. Its people mostly are poor farmers and speak the native dialect Cakchiquel, except men who know Spanish to take their harvest to market. Patzún is surrounded by tiny aldeas, or villages, in the mountains.

"I was bewildered by the people in the church," Merdes Judd recalled. "I'd never seen such poverty. I saw these guys with Tommy guns in their laps. I thought that was pretty cool because they were going to Mass."

But the impoverished children made the biggest impression on Merdes. As she was praying in the church during that first trip, asking God how she could help those children, Babuin told her he wanted to paint a portrait of Janet.

To Merdes Judd, this was a sign from God. A woman from Houston had given her \$500 exactly for that purpose, to buy a portrait. "We're not supposed to ask (God) for signs," Merdes Judd said. "But that's me — very demanding."

She told Father Babuin she had \$500 to help his children. The portrait of Janet still hangs in her living room, a shrine where she prays for miracles.

The money went to buy land for a nursery and day care, which was dedicated in 1988 to Janet's memory. At the dedication, Mercedes Judd noticed many of the children were sniffing. She asked Babuin what the Franciscans would need to start a hospital.

He gave her a list, in Spanish, which she realized upon her return to Corpus Christi was more than cough syrup and bandages. She needed a complete laboratory.

Clinica Corpus Christi

Merdes Judd wasn't sure she could live up to the challenge of outfitting an entire clinic, though. She was about to give up. Again, she prayed.

One day she wore her huipil, a colorful Guatemalan blouse, to work at H-E-B and caught the attention of TV newscaster Ron Fulton. He did a story for KIII that brought in \$2,000 in donations for the hospital. Mercedes Judd named it Clinica Corpus Christi on the fly during an interview with Fulton after her friend had suggested Clinica de Corpus Christi.

The hospital was dedicated on Jan. 14, 1991 — Mercedes Judd's 69th birthday.

Since the dedication, Mercedes Judd almost never stopped working to bring more equipment to Patzún. The equipment she gathers may be old by American standards, but it's priceless to the people of Patzún.

Postleware remembers when Mercedes Judd visited her family in Korea and youngest daughter Megan had to go to the emergency room with a sore throat and fever. Mercedes Judd walked the halls of that hospital begging instruments for her clinic in Guatemala.

"I was horrified," Postleware said. "But this is what she does. She will speak up and ask for what she wants. Megan got antibiotics and she came out with a bag full of instruments. They were both happy."

The pursuit of one piece of equipment even helped Mercedes Judd find new love. Carl Mercedes died in 2000 of congestive heart failure. While he was homebound, Eddie Hrcir brought a portable machine to take X-rays of Carl's chest.

Merdes Judd eyed that machine, and Hrcir gave the clinic an older version and even traveled to Guatemala. A year or so later, Hrcir called Mercedes Judd and asked if she would go to dinner with his uncle Al.

"She didn't want to go to dinner with some old man," Postleware laughed. "But they had given her an X-ray machine."

Merdes Judd and Al Judd both laugh about that first dinner too — she didn't like him much. But Judd was persistent, and six months later they were married. Mercedes Judd was 80.

'All because of Sara'

Franciscan nuns, some of whom are nurses and doctors, run the hospital most of the time, while U.S. doctors visit and complete as many procedures as they can in a week or two.

No one has kept track of how many procedures the teams of doctors, nurses and other volunteers has performed in and around Patzún since 1991. Mercedes Judd seemed to have little trouble persuading them to go.

Steve Woerner, now CEO of Driscoll Children's Hospital, said Mercedes Judd never gave him a chance to decide whether he would go when he met her in 1994.

"Sara comes in and points at me and says, 'Young man, God wants you to go to Guatemala,' just like that. No hello or anything," Woerner said. "She had so much conviction that I said, 'Yes, ma'am.'"

Over the years, the clinic gained two operating rooms and more equipment, though conditions were far from perfect. Woerner, a former surgical nurse, remembers scrounging for scraps of paper to draft patients' charts. The rooms were almost too small to perform surgery, and there was no air conditioning, he said.

The most common procedure is hernia surgery, Woerner said. Guatemalans carry pots on their head filled with water to live on and water their fields. A hernia could end their livelihood.

Though Mercedes Judd doesn't speak the native dialect and knows little Spanish, she connected with the people, Woerner and others said. They call her Doña Sara.

"Everyone kind of looked to her more as a religious figure," Woerner said. "She would go in and visit with the patients after surgery. And they would respond to her."

Meanwhile, Mercedes Judd was navigating the Guatemalan government and religious politics to keep her hospital thriving. She didn't always get along with Babuin and the nuns, and some in Guatemala weren't keen on a woman running the show.

"This work was not done for the sisters or the priests," she said recently, wagging a finger. "This was done for the people of Patzún. Remember that."

Dr. Haysam Dawod, a local dentist, first traveled there in 1996 after listening to Mercedes Judd speak at a Rotary Club meeting. At first, he could only pull teeth. But the Rotarians helped buy portable dental equipment and a generator so he could travel into the mountain villages and perform a range of work, even in places with no electricity.

"Their dental I.Q. went up so much over the years we went there," said Dawod, who made his last trip two years ago but plans to go back. "When we first went, all people would want is their tooth taken out. By the end of my last visit there, people came in and not only did they

not want their tooth taken out, they wanted the white filling instead of silver.”

Dawod frequently travels with Danny Kollaja, aka Lanky the Clown, to break the ice with children. Kollaja said his original purpose was to keep curious people away from the windows so dentists could have light as they worked. Since then he has brought clowns from around the country, and they bring extra red noses for doctors to wear and keep the mood light.

Doctors and nurses often use their vacation time to go to Patzún. They pay their way, work long days and carry supplies over mountain roads to get to patients.

“What’s wonderful is no one sees it as grunt work or hard,” Kollaja said. “No one’s complaining. ... It’s just magical that we can get the right people on these trips, because they have the right attitude and smiles. It’s all because of Sara.”

Children first

For her part, Mercedes Judd is proud that she never took administrative fees from money donated to Clinica Corpus Christi. A lawyer and others worked for her nonprofit for free.

She is slowing down now. A fall at a local store two years ago left her with a broken back, and she slipped and broke her hip on the way to a doctor’s appointment after that. Though she’s in good health otherwise, the pain is sometimes too much to bear.

A band of thieves raided Clinica Corpus Christi after Babuin’s death in 2000, and Mercedes Judd didn’t think she could restock. She prayed.

Her prayers were answered by a phone call from Linda McCartney of Faith in Practice, a nonprofit that sends medical missions to Central America. Faith in Practice spent \$75,000 renovating the clinic and rededicated it on Jan. 14, 2007 — Mercedes Judd’s 85th birthday and the last time she visited Guatemala.

Faith in Practice sent three teams to Clinica Corpus Christi last year and plans to continue. Friend Pat Evans is continuing Mercedes Judd’s efforts and expanding outreach to Reynosa, Mexico.

Mercedes Judd believes God built the clinic through her and will continue it after she’s gone, if it is his will.

She is more comfortable talking about God than about herself. She doesn’t want any awards. She’d rather have \$5 to help the children.

She often shifts the conversation to others who helped her. Or to the children.

The first baby born at the hospital the day after the dedication and Mercedes Judd’s birthday was named Carlos. He almost died, a possibility Mercedes Judd said she wouldn’t know how to deal with. She prayed, and Carlos lived.

Mercedes Judd is Carlos’ godmother, and the two are still in touch. She keeps his photo on her living room wall.

It was the thought of Carlos that stopped Mercedes Judd’s tears recently when she talked about never seeing Guatemala again. It was always the children that kept her going. The children, and her faith.

“Whenever I go over it,” Mercedes Judd ruminated on her life, “I guess I just have all this love. I hope I shared it. I hope I was pleasing to God.”

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Posted by 241571 on May 24, 2009 at 6:16 a.m.

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Thanks for the wonderful story about Sara. I have always said, if you want to really know what love is, you should meet Sara. The conversations I’ve had with her, over the years, changed who I was- for the better. Sara Judd is a living saint.


 Posted by 251529 on May 24, 2009 at 11:02 a.m. [Reply To This Post](#) | [Suggest Removal](#)

What a wonderful woman, it's great to see there are people willing to help others.

 Posted by 237538 on May 24, 2009 at 11:43 a.m. [Reply To This Post](#) | [Suggest Removal](#)

Sara, I moved from CC sometime ago, but whenever I think of Corpus and the people there, you are always at the top of the list.

We were nieghbors back in the early eighties. I am glad to see that your dreams of Clinica Corpus Christi came true. You told me about the miracle you would hope someday would come through your daughter. It has, it's been your mission to help the poor. You have touched many many lives and none can say they were not better after they met you. You are in my prayers Sara. God Bless.

 Posted by 717058 on May 24, 2009 at 6:07 p.m. [Reply To This Post](#) | [Suggest Removal](#)

And is anyone else smelling a fish tale here? He claims to have moved here from Port Aransas and before that San Antonio because he shot a intruder in his home and the reputed gang member vowed revenge? Well I believe he just opened himself up to being found by this gang member...why would someone who wanted to stay hidden from someone else ...make themselves known in the Corpus Christi "mullet Wrapper" (i.e. previous poster)...sure makes me wonder if I am in danger now because of this circus act with the paper.....do I need to worried about gang memebers showing up in my neighborhood?


My grandkids have been coming to my both my places of residence in this neighborhood and I have never felt inclined to have to haul them in the house just because someone who is responsible is target shooting. Get real.....

Oh as far as the Scotts are concerned did any one ask them about their shooting???? Probably not!!!! And again they moved into the area without doing their homework on the neighborhood in fron t of them.....Can we spell COUNTRY people? If these people that are siding with Osborn don't like shooting ...what in God's name are you living in the country for....go buy yourself a nice little townhome in the city and then everyone can tell you what you can and can't do....see how you like that!!!!

Oh and Caller Times before you printed the part about the cannon...you may have should have done your homework too.....the sound of the boom that everyone wants to pin on the Valentines....is coming from across the lake in another neighborhood.....anyone really standing outside can tell it ...it isn't rocket sciencebut again a false accusation to try to make a already stupid lawsuit even more useless!!!!

I will end this by saying that up until Osborn moved into this neighborhoodthe target shooting was NEVER an issue and I am one of the remaining former Association Board members. Never at any bylaws meeting was there ONE person that complained about the berms or the shooting. Never did any one of these neighbors ever call me or any board member to complain about the berms or the shooting..See a pattern here folks.....not until Osborn decided to be a rotten neighbor!!!!!! I will be one hoping that this utterly ridiculous lawsuit stands just as it is.....UTTERLY RIDICULOUS and uncalled for!!!!!

Lanie Gilkerson

 Posted by 284138 on May 24, 2009 at 7 p.m. [Reply To This Post](#) | [Suggest Removal](#)

in response to 717058

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