

This message sent from Jenny Rothwell:

A Personal Memory of the Earthquake: Guatemala, February 4th, 1976.

In the early hours of February 4th my home which was 2-3 minutes walk from the clinic started to violently shake and the wardrobe fell and sloped against the wall, my bed was under this gap which when I think of it it saved my life as most of our roofs caved in which killed many as the tiles were solid and very heavy. When I realized what had happened I dressed rapidly and went outside to see devastation, rubble from adobe homes destroyed and people wandering about. I wandered down the street to the Clinic where Doc, Dr. Lee Huhn, myself, Peace Corps workers and the nurses who lived in the area arrived. The roads were unusable for a time due to landslides so we were isolated in the epicentre of the quake.

The Docs weighed the situation up and luckily the Hospitalito was undamaged except for some cracks as it had been erected to be quake proof. As it was really dark we made sure all in the hospital were safe and went and looked nearby to see what and where folk were and then returned to the hospital. That's when the enormity of how big the quake was became apparent. There was no time to feel scared as we saw people carrying the injured in, leave them, which was not their culture to do this, but we soon learnt what was happening when they return time and time again, as well as burying their loved ones in between as the law says you must be buried in 24 hours so the village people who were uninjured dug communal graves. That night I saw what human kindness was more than ever before. Doc and Lee would see the most injured people and I would see the people who had less serious injuries. We were lucky in a way as at that time the Clinic had had a donation of medicines and dressings etc from the USA. I cleaned and sutured wounds and put casts on the old and young who had simple fractures marking them all so that when they could be xrayed it would be known it was a nurse who had done them. A very hectic time for the next 2-3 days while the authorities were working out where and what was needed and it was in that time the extent of the damage was seen, lots of whole villages gone under the landslides and many of the rural homes destroyed. 23,000 people were said to be dead and 1000s injured mainly in the highlands. On day 3 the USA army managed to fly in nearby and set up a mini hospital with all facilities (even bringing food) which was a relief to all of us. It was only then I saw I was covered in bruises most likely from when I struggled to get out of my home.

Once the immediate emergency was over and the roads from the capital could be opened and the runways cleared more help could arrive. Later organizations came and small homes were built using the cross beams which are earthquake proof as far as possible. Up till this time we were in tents made of sheets or whatever was found, in cars and even in the open. Some homes were undamaged but fear stopped us living in them for fear of further tremors to which we had many. My worst thought was for my family in ENGLAND; from the news they knew I was in the epicentre but we couldn't get news to them that I was safe as all communications were down. When you have disasters like this the adrenaline rises and fear is not there.

The army did bring in water supplies when the roads opened and food was collected from under the tiendas - rice, beans etc etc. The local people say that the earthquake was sent to punish them, but the Mayan indians in the highlands are the nicest people you could wish to meet. I might have been there to teach healthcare and train the local village people but in return they taught me so much that my life changed.

Later I became known to some as disastrous Jenny as I always seemed to be in or nearby a disaster zone when they happened- 2 earthquakes, volcano eruption, tidal waves, and various incidents.

I feel very humbled to have worked and lived with these wonderful people who taught me so much for 10 years of my life, the last 2 mainly spent in Puerto Barrios doing the work with the Lutheran Church Missionaries doing the work Doc and Lee had taught me, returning to Doc to help out when he was away.

Jenny Rothwell