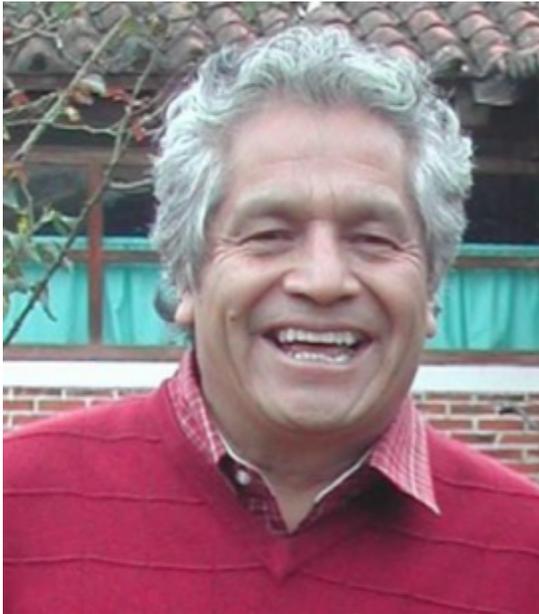


The Behrhorst Ripples

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My parents always wanted me to be a priest. I came from a large family in Comalapa which had few economic resources. My father was a farmer, and a musician by the way, and my mother was a homemaker. I completed primary school by the time I was 13, but then I thought that I had hit a wall. My parents did not have money for me to continue studying. Instead, I worked in the fields. Fortunately, scholarships through the Benedictines were being advertised. I applied, realizing that if I got accepted, I would become a priest, fulfilling my parents' hopes for me.

Indeed, I did receive a scholarship and in 1968 left for Sololá where I went to boarding school for five years. My parents had to pay their part, too, Q35/month. Actually, I had a threat over my head. My father said that if I didn't study and do well, I would have to come back home and work in the fields, not my first choice for my future. I did do very well, consistently earning high grades.

By 1973, I began my seminary studies in Guatemala City. I was maturing in many ways, but I was not maturing religiously. I knew that this was not my calling. But the Benedictines had a different role for me; for one year, I was an art and music teacher in Patzún at the Colegio San Bernadín. Then I was asked to return to the seminary to become a monk. This plan I followed but my heart was not in it. Once, for example, I saw a doctor who was wearing a white smock, and I somehow knew that this was what I, too, wanted to do! Wear a doctor's smock! On the 19th of July, 1975, I left the seminary.

In 1976, I began medical school, again, with a scholarship, and completed my studies in six years, without ever dropping a course. During my last year of school I did my internship in two places, the Health Center in Patzún (back to Patzún!) and in the National Hospital in Antigua.

Of course I knew the Behrhorst Hospital, mainly through my sister, Fidelina who was a nutritionist at Behrhorst. Often I would stop by the hospital during medical school, and I even did volunteer work there, just to help Dr. Behrhorst. In 1982, when I completed my studies, I was hired by Dr. Behrhorst because he was very shorthanded. These were very hard times for our country and for Behrhorst as well. One of the doctors, Dr. Sosa, had just been murdered and the other doctor had quit. This was the extent of my interview: "Are you a guerrilla?" I then worked side by side with Dr. Behrhorst and to my amazement, he gave me a lot of responsibility. In fact, when he made the decision to go to Tulane University to teach in the School of Tropical Medicine, he said, "Now you are in charge." I said, "Me? Please don't go; I still haven't completed my medical dissertation. I'm not ready for this." He said, "You are ready." Thus, I worked until 1987, first as the only doctor, seeing people in the day clinic and then after that, caring for those in the hospital. Later, Dr. Wilson Arias was hired and we were able to share the responsibilities.

Initially, there were some things that were difficult for me to accept in the Behrhorst approach. I had been trained in techniques which were not practiced in the hospital. For example, the people with TB were not kept quarantined from their families. In fact, their families were encouraged to stay with them and cook for them. And I didn't expect to see chickens with tied feet kept under patients' beds! Dr. Behrhorst said that people heal more quickly and completely when family support and love can be present. And the chickens under the bed can make good chicken soup! Gradually, I became a Behrhorst convert.

I left Behrhorst for some years, and then returned as part of the medical staff in 1995. People remembered me as having worked with Dr. Behrhorst. Somehow, that added to peoples' trust in me. Shortly thereafter, the board of directors asked me to be the temporary executive director because Licdo. Marcelino Vasquez left. Now this is my position, and I am dedicated to carrying on Behrhorst work.

Since my first days here there have been many changes in the lives of people we serve. There are more people economically able to pay the modest prices that we charge for services. Our people are principally farmers, and the introduction of non-traditional crops has helped their income significantly. But life is still hard for people and Mayans, especially poor Mayans, experience discrimination daily. But the Behrhorst philosophy still holds true and we seek to practice it: everyone who needs help receives it, whether or not they can pay. We are committed to caring for people, respecting their dignity as human beings, not their economic status.