

Guyana Update December 2009

I left New York just after midnight on Monday, December 6th and arrived in Guyana at 6:54 AM. Sudesh, Jenny's nephew, met me at the airport and took me to Aunt Ethyl.

Auntie Ethyl had prepared a breakfast of fruit, and pepperpot and bread. Delicious!!

12/7/09 - Monday

Donna McPherson came for me at 9:00 AM and we went to Fogarty's to exchange some money (\$300 US = \$60,000 GY). Then we went to collect the supplies we had shipped. Expenses included customs taxes, brokerage and security fees, and payment to the men who unloaded the shipment.

After everything was unloaded, I had to bring all of the boxes and bags into the house. What an ordeal that was! It took me about 2 hours to finish. During this trip, items were given to the following: Patients at Georgetown Public Hospital; University of Guyana Library; Medical Students Association; National Library Georgetown; two literacy programs in Sophia; St. Rose's High School; Fr. Montrose for children in Berbice: Charlestown Secondary School; St. Ann's Orphanage; Mr. Basil & Mrs. Enid Simon for St. Cuthbert's Mission; children in Guy Hoc Park – Tuckville; children at the Dorcas club on Durban Street; Linessa Robin in Agricola; Tandykah McPherson; and Donna McPherson. Donna McPherson was also given books and clothing for her church.

It took a total of 6 hours over a period of a few days to sort things out.

12/08/09 - Tuesday

Stayed at home and sorted out the items for distribution. The National Library collected their lot, and three students from UGMS stopped by. They also collected their books (approximately 6 boxes).

12/9/09 - Wednesday

Stayed at home

12/10/09 - Thursday

I took several boxes of science and Spanish textbooks, literature books, and school supplies to St. Roses. I then went to Charlestown Secondary School. I had a long conversation about the needs of the school with the Headmistress, Ms. Bryan. This school faces many challenges, and the lack of computers tops the list. Currently they have three that are in working condition. Students in their final year of high school take the Caribbean Examinations Council exams, commonly known as the CXC. Many subject tests are offered including Information Technology. However, many students at Charlestown Secondary are unable to sit for this examination due to the lack of resources. If a student's family does have a computer at home, that student is encouraged to bring it to school as she or he prepares for, and takes the examination.

On a positive note, a donor on behalf of Empowerment and Equity Through Education gave Charlestown Secondary School \$125 dollars to connect the school to the Internet. The connection has already been made, and the Headmistress said that an e-mail address for the school will be created as soon as the school reopens in January after the Christmas break.

I took a covered speedboat from Georgetown to Vreed-en-Hoop, and then took a short-drop taxi to Goede Fortune, West Coast Demerara to visit the Goede Fortune Center. Each Thursday, children can go there for a free hot meal. On this day, there were approximately 35 children who enjoyed a vegetarian meal and a beverage. A gift bag that included homemade cake, and a few trinkets for Christmas followed this.

12/11/09 - Friday

Spanish textbooks and accompanying audio recordings were taken to Charlestown Secondary. I then went to the University of Guyana, Turkeyne Campus to take several boxes of science and literature textbooks for their library. I met with Ms. Gloria Cummings, the Deputy Librarian, who was very appreciative of the donation. We met briefly last year there at UG because at the time I went, the library was under a major renovation due involving the removal of asbestos. We were not able to have a detailed discussion about what EEE does, but the Chief Librarian who was also present, was familiar with the name of the organization because she had seen the name stamped on the many books that have been donated to the Medical School over the years.

I then met with approximately 30 first and second year medical students at the Medical School at noon to discuss the activities of Empowerment and Equity Through Education.

It was a lively discussion where I told them what EEE does. I was keen to hear from them about their challenges as medical students, and what their current needs were. Lack of anatomical models - brain, abdomen skeletons -, textbooks as well as E-books on CDs, microscopic slides with specimens, flash cards, videos on anatomy (especially of the nervous system), embryology, and histology were among needs stated. They also stated that they would like to have increased contact with medical students overseas, as well as to be able to do electives at medical schools in the United States. I suggested that they contact the Student National Medical Association national office to see if and how the University of Guyana Medical Students Association can interact with them. This was a very fruitful meeting and these students now know more about EEE and we look forward to having an ongoing relationship.

I went to the Georgetown Public Hospital to meet the third and fourth year medical students. There I spoke with these student doctors who had many questions about medical school training in the US, the USMLE, and the application process to residency training programs. In addition to answering these questions, I took the opportunity to tell them about the premedical requirements for students applying to medical schools in the U.S. I explained the emphasis on looking at a student's record of participation in community service activities, and exposure to the field prior to applying to medical school. Some students were surprised that emphasis is placed in these areas. Once again, this was a lively discussion, in which I encouraged them to keep in mind why they chose to become physicians, and within their list of reasons one should be for the improved health of their patients regardless of their economic backgrounds.

At the end of the meeting, the medical students gave me a plaque in appreciation for many books and medical models donated to the University of Guyana Medical School and to the Medical Students Association over the past several years. I accepted it on behalf of the many donors who continue to support the efforts of Empowerment and Equity Through Education. We finished the celebration with pizza and soda – quite similar to the way medical students in the U.S. celebrate an event!

12/12/09 – Saturday

I set this day aside to do something I had never done – take trip to the Kaieteur. This majestic 822 ft high waterfall in the interior of Guyana is one of most powerful waterfalls in the world.

Eight of us started at 6:45 AM, leaving by a minivan to go to Timeri Airport. (Three Israelis, one Brit living in England, and another who currently lives in Bermuda, one Guyanese-Canadian living in Canada, one Guyanese living in Guyana, and me.) It was raining, and the western sky was very dark. The flight lasted about two hours, and despite the inclement weather, the journey was smooth. Flying over Guyana's rainforest is impressive. From the air, the trees look like large heads of broccoli tightly packed next to each other with rivers, small and large and the occasional waterfall flowing through the clumps.

Once there, we hiked for about 30 minutes through the rainforest. The roar of the waterfall became more audible the closer we got. The mighty rust-colored waters of the Potaro River flowed swiftly, steadily and calmly then suddenly formed a great mist as it dropped 741 ft straight down. As it was a very cloudy day, the rainbow that is usually visible at the Falls could not be seen.

After taking a few photographs we walked a bit further. We stopped to see the tiny golden frog that only lives in giant bromeliads. Mr. Carter, the tour guide, was skilled at finding one, luring it onto his hand, and retrieving it after it promptly jumped onto the ground

On our way back to the plane, we saw the little red plants that devour small insects that come their way. Mr. Carter pointed out that there were no mosquitoes in that area even though there were many pools of stagnant water about. I suggested that perhaps some could be taken to Georgetown and planted in everyone's garden as that would be one sure way of ridding the City of its hordes of mosquitoes.

A bit further, we saw standing very still in our path an armadillo, about 30 inches tip to tail. It balanced motionless for many minutes on its clawed toes as our chatter went to a mere whisper after noticing it.

On our return to Timeri airport, we saw several people on the upper level of the airport with cameras, and there was a red carpet rolled out on the tarmac. The spectators and members of the media were there for the arrival of Pele who was due to land. Alas! We did not get to see him because the seven of us who were going on another tour had to catch the minivan that was going to take us from Timeri to a boat landing along the Demerara River where we took a speedboat to Arrowpoint – a resort at the Amerindian village Santa Mission.

We took the speedboat to the West Bank and down the Kamuni Creek. It took less than ten minutes to cross the river where the water was relatively calm. The only ripples present were those formed by our boat, or by the canoes of Ameridian families going to and fro. (That was the day when inhabitants in that area, who are Amerindian, were scheduled to have their photographs taken for their government-issued identification cards.

Arrowpoint is located on the Kamuni Creek, and the boat took no more than 45 minutes to get there. Along the way we passed Hopetown that was once a Chinese village established in the mid-to-late 1800s. No Chinese are there today. The Creek meanders through areas that are sheltered by overhanging branches of bamboo and other trees, other parts where the mangrove roots grow out from the water's edge, to places where trees are in the distance and tall grass lines the banks. Wild parrots and other birds can be seen and heard flying overhead.

When we arrived at our destination it was time for lunch. Following the meal we went on a long hike into the forest. Our guide pointed out several plants that the Amerindians use for medicinal purposes.

Our hike ended further up the bank of Kumuni Creek where the trees were very tall and quite close together. There we separated into pairs, and boarded two-person canoes. As I was at the stern, I figured out through trial and error how to guide this vessel that seemed to have a mind of its own. My fellow canoeing partner and I felt quite good about our achievement. No sooner had we left our individual canoes, than it was time to board the speedboat for our return journey.

12/13/09 - Sunday

Today was spent very quietly. I went to the 7:30 AM service at the Church of the Immaculate Conception, the Catholic Cathedral in Georgetown. There was no priest present. As the celebration continued, I realized that I was witnessing something new. Due to the lack of Catholic priests it will become more commonplace to have services like this rather than a priest say mass.

In the evening, I went to dinner at Celina's restaurant on the Sea Wall with Ms. Paulette Paul, Public Relations Officer at the University Of Guyana.

12/14/09 - Monday

I took baby clothes, and toiletries to a young girl in a village on the East Bank of the Demerara Rivera. I met her last year after tragedy struck her family. Her mother committed suicide, and left five children, the youngest being a few weeks old, and the next about two years old. The girl had to look after her baby sister. She started University this year and we have corresponded intermittently via e-mail since last year. The baby stays at her godmother who graduated from UG in November, but has not yet been successful in finding employment.

I spoke with Mr. Khan at Georgetown Public Hospital, and once again, he gave me permission to make the yearly distribution of toiletries at the hospital on Friday, December 17th after lunch. The medical students had suggested that day and time because some of them would be free to assist with the distribution.

12/15/09 – Tuesday

This was a quiet day. At 5:00 PM Sharon Patterson stopped by. Our conversation centered on ways EEE could continue to assist children and families in need. Coincidentally, she received a telephone call from Enid Simon, an Amerindian woman who lives with her husband and children in St. Cuthbert's Mission which is by the Mahica River. I expressed my desire to get supplies to the Amerindians, so we arranged that I will meet Enid on Friday.

12/16/09 – Wednesday

I took a taxi to the National Library to take some additional books, and to collect the letter of receipt for the donated books, then I went to the Beacon Foundation to take the donation of men's clothes. Mr. Ann Kisson, Director, explained that the organization has a daily feeding program where homeless men and women come for lunch each day. Ms. Grenada, who volunteers at the Foundation, asked me to say a few words.

Some of the homeless people asked me questions such as in what year I left Guyana, and where I lived before leaving, and what school did I attend. One gentleman spoke of his difficulty walking with the crutches he has because the rubber at the bottom of both of them had worn away, and he was walking on the bare metal. A very gaunt looking woman had an extremely distended stomach. I was told that the growth is a tumor, and that she had been advised some time ago to have it surgically removed. In November 2008 when the doctors in the US Navy were performing medical procedures on their ship in the Atlantic off the Guyana coastline, she was told that they would operate when they returned in 2009. They did not return, and now the growth has increased in size considerably. The doctors at Georgetown Public Hospital will not operate because they feel that she would not survive the operation.

12/17/09 – Thursday

I met Fr. Montrose at the Immaculate Conception Rectory where I gave him school supplies and clothing for children in Berbice. Fr. Montrose comes to Georgetown weekly. We had a conversation about the lack of priests, and the challenges of having priests coming from Nigeria and India and not staying for any length of time.

I went to Tutorial High School to meet the Head Mistress because Tutorial had received many reading books in June. As she was away at, I met with the Deputy instead, and she expressed the school's gratitude at receiving the books.

12/18/09 – Friday

Sharon came for me and collected items for a distribution of gifts for a program in Agricola. They were having their Christmas party on Sunday afternoon and they appreciated additional gifts for the children. When we got to Sharon's office, Enid and Basil Simon were already there. They were able to get school supplies and clothing from EEE to take back to St. Cuthbert's mission. They were very appreciative of the donation.

I learned that the first secondary school in St. Cuthbert's was opened in September 2009, and receiving books and school supplies will be of great help to them. An effort will be made to

make a better assessment of the school, its size, and number of pupils in each class as this will help to better target donations for that area. Basil is the village counselor. Attempts will be made to contact the Touthoul, (Village Chief), as we will need to contact him if sustained contact with the village is to occur.

Garfield Parker, President of the University of Guyana Medical Students Association, and another medical student, came for me to go with the supplies to be distributed to the patients at the Georgetown Public Hospital. In the past, gifts were given to mothers with newborn infants only. This year, the decision was made to have a wider distribution to include patients on the following wards: Male and female surgery; male and female medicine; AIDS; pediatrics; maternity; and newborn. The three large suitcases, and three very large bags taken included soap, deodorant, powder, toothbrushes, wash cloths, and large bath towels. Approximately 200 patients and staff were given these gifts. Patients were appreciative of the gifts and a few called me over to specifically thank me for the gifts, and also for their quality.

The distribution ended close to 2:00 PM. I returned home at 5:00 PM and then left for a wine tasting given by Warren and Tracy Douglas. Warren is Guyanese, and Tracy is an American. They met in the U.S., married, have children, and in 2007 went to Guyana. She decided to stay while he returned to the U.S. to settle their affairs. He returned to Guyana where they now live. He makes wine from local fruits such as jagoon, plum, cherry, and Auntie Desma. I tried the plum, cherry, and Auntie Desma and they were all delicious.

I got home in time to leave with Auntie Ethyl to go to the Christmas caroling by the Bishop's High School old students. It was a truly lovely evening, and I was surprised to see Garfield Parker playing the bass drum for their steel pan group. Among the others there was Helen Bowman, CEO, St. Joseph's Mercy Hospital. We had a very interesting discussion of ways doctors from the U.S. could go to Guyana and volunteer their services at St. Joseph's Mercy Hospital. We agreed that we would continue this conversation when I returned to New York.

12/19/09 – Saturday

I took composition books, and other school supplies to the Sophia Literacy program that is run by the Rotary Club of Guyana. Later, I took the remaining male clothing to the Palms, a retirement home run by the Government. I left there and went to meet Ms. Bryan at Oasis Internet Café. In addition to Ms. Bryan, I met Mr. Vanderstoop who runs the Mildred Mansfield Youth Club on Durban Street. This organization has programs for single parents, and the under privileged in Werk-en-Rust, Charlestown, Wortmanville, and Albouystown. There was a Christmas party for those who attend the programs, and EEE gave composition notebooks, pencils, pens, and erasers.

In the evening, I met Dr. Carl Hanoman, and three students from the Executive Board of the University of Guyana Medical Students Association, Morona Sukhoo-Pratab, Secretary; Bret Johnson, Vice President; and Kedmah Dohr. The main topic discussed was the possibility of students from UG doing international electives in New York.

12/20/09 – Sunday

I went to church at Our Lady of Fatima and there I saw Helen Bowman. She is a member of the choir. I took the remaining school supplies, clothing, and deodorant to families in a three-block radius in Guy Hoc Park, in Tuckville, Greater Georgetown. We distributed these items to approximately 50 children, and adult males. In the evening, I went to St. Ann's Orphanage to give out the last of the school supplies which filled a large box; pencils, pens, crayons glue, sticks, composition notebooks.

12/21/09 – Monday

Left home at 4:45 AM for the airport. My Auntie Ethyl returned to the US with me. The flight was uneventful, and we returned to New York and to a foot of snow.