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**COACHELLA VALLEY VOLUNTEERS CHANGE LIVES ON IMAHELPS MEDICAL MISSION TO PARAGUAY**

***Dr. Todd Swenning, an orthopedic surgeon from Desert Regional Medical Center, performed life-changing surgeries***

***to correct deformities in nearly 20 children.   
  
He was one of more than two dozen Coachella Valley doctors and nurses who joined other IMAHelps volunteers in treating nearly 7,000 patients and performing 183 surgeries   
during a medical mission to Luque, Paraguay.***

RANCHO MIRAGE, Calif., Sept. 17, 2019 — IMAHelps volunteers from the Coachella Valley first met 4-year-old “Mauricio” during a medical humanitarian mission to Luque, Paraguay last year.

Mission volunteers described Mauricio as “a gregarious fireball of a kid,” always smiling and wanting to play. But Mauricio was born with a congenital malformation that caused his legs to severely bow, and when he arrived with his mother near the end of IMAHelps’ week-long medical mission in 2018, it too late for the Coachella Valley volunteers to help him. Their surgery schedule was already full.

It was a different story this year, however.

When IMAHelps volunteers arrived at the General Hospital in Luque in late July, Mauricio and his mom showed up near the beginning of the weeklong mission, early enough to get on the surgery schedule with Dr. Todd Swenning, the orthopedic surgeon who would soon change his life.

“This year, we made sure we earmarked a morning so we could take care of little Mauricio,” said Dr. Swenning, who works as director of orthopedics at Desert Regional Medical Center in Palm Springs.

Mauricio not only suffered from severely bowed legs, a condition called Blount’s disease, but a severely crooked left foot, which pointed toward his right heel.

Dr. Swenning not only straightened Mauricio’s legs, but he corrected his left foot, using special steel plates and screws that had been donated to IMAHelps by Kalamazoo, Mich.-based Stryker Corporation, one of the world’s leading suppliers of surgical products.

Dr. Swenning said Stryker donated enough material to enable him to repair deformities in more than two dozen Paraguayan children who could never afford such care, let alone find a surgeon in Paraguay who could perform orthopedic surgery.

Considered South America’s fourth poorest country, Paraguay suffers from a severe shortage of orthopedic surgeons and other surgical specialists, most of whom leave the country for higher paying jobs in neighboring Brazil or Argentina as soon as they receive their surgical training.

So having Dr. Swenning and the IMAHelps team in Paraguay was a miracle that brought tears of joy to many families who could never otherwise receive such care.

“It’s really humbling. I’m grateful for the opportunity to help,” said Dr. Swenning, who has performed numerous life-changing surgeries on children and young adults since he started volunteering with IMAHelps in Central America in 2016.

Other local IMAHelps volunteers include Dr. Doriana Cosgrove, an anesthesiologist and co-owner of Rancho Mirage-based Desert Med Aesthetics who manages the surgery schedule on IMAHelps missions and provides anesthesia for children and other patients prior to surgery.

Unlike most medical mission groups, which offer a single surgical specialty, such as cleft lip or cleft palate repairs, IMAHelps brings an entire hospital team into the impoverished countries it serves, and provides a wide range of surgical specialties that would not otherwise be available.

Several children treated by IMAHelps surgeons in Paraguay were born with their fingers stuck together, a condition called syndactaly. “When our surgeons can separate their fingers, it’s life changing for these children,” Dr. Cosgrove said. “Now they can use their fingers to grab things.”

Other Coachella Valley doctors, such as Dr. Nina Maw Maw, an internal medicine doctor from Rancho Mirage who has volunteered with IMAHelps since 2012, provided check ups and consultations for a wide range of patients, many of whom waited all night for a chance to see the Coachella Valley volunteers.

During their weeklong mission in late July and early August, IMAHelps volunteers provided just over $6 million worth of medical, dental, surgical and prosthetic care to 6,943 patients, 183 of whom received surgeries.

Considering that the mission was paid for with $65,000 in donations, the return on investment (ROI) was $92.48 for each dollar donated to IMAHelps for the mission.

IMAHelps has no paid staff and all of its volunteers cover their own travel expenses. This way, every dollar the organization collects is used to pay for medical mission supplies and in- country transportation, with only a fraction of the proceeds being used to maintain the organization’s website and accounting.

Since Ines Allen and her husband, Tracey, co-founded IMAHelps in 2000, the Rancho Mirage-based non-profit organization has grown from a small group of about a dozen volunteers to an entire mobile hospital team with more 130 volunteers. IMAHelps has organized more than 20 medical missions and treated more than 100,000 patients in some of the poorest communities in Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Peru, Paraguay and Mexico and changed the lives not only of its patients, but of its volunteers.

IMAHelps volunteers also do humanitarian work in the Coachella Valley, providing doctors and dentists for the annual daylong medical mission in Thermal the last Saturday of each September, which is organized by the Flying Doctors of Southern California, as well as a variety of other humanitarian efforts. To learn more about IMAHelps and to support our medical humanitarian efforts, please visit [www.imahelps.org](http://www.imahelps.org).