

July 1980: I am a 27-year-old Long Island special education teacher with reddish-brown hair. For the summer I am joining a volunteer group going to Mexico to work with children living in cardboard hovels in the Tijuana municipal dump. I have absolutely no idea what I am getting myself into.

For a month I teach in the insect-infested dump and breathe the stench of the decaying dead animals and garbage. (People think city air is bad. Visit the dump.)

My volunteer time is up, and I say good-bye as though I will never see my new dump friends again. I go home thinking my good deed to mankind is done. I have earned my place in heaven.

But for the next year I can't get those kids off my mind.

Summers of 1981 and '82: I try to convince myself that my summers should be spent at my beach home on Long Island, but it doesn't work. I return to the Mexican dump for two more summers, each time assuring myself that it is the last. Why, I am so convinced of that decision, I never even learn a word of Spanish. Oh, maybe "*Buenos dias*" and "*hola*," but that's it. Why should I? I live on Long Island.

September 1983: Those kids at the dump are like human magnets. I resist their pull, but eventually I give in. I take a year's leave of absence from my Long Island teaching job and move to Tijuana. Truthfully, I am honored that the community has accepted me into their lives, and I find it very spiritually rewarding to teach these children living in such horrendous conditions. But the real miracle is they manage to teach me a little Spanish.

My portable outdoor school is a blue tarp. When I arrive each day in my 15-year-old beat up green Ford van that I had driven from New York, the twenty-five children gather for class. The pigs, ducks, dogs, chickens, and cows that also gather in our outdoor classroom don't distract the students or me. It's the flies buzzing around my ears that I hate.

For my evening classes for the ten teenagers and adults who scavenge in the dump during the day, I bring my own kerosene lantern and we use a dirt floor bedroom as our classroom. We don't use this cramped room during the day because the tin roof makes it unbearably hot.

But it's the field trips away from the dump that provide experiences the children will remember most.

So, to give them glimpses of career possibilities beyond scavenging, I take the kids everywhere. I set up the trips beforehand, asking managers to give the students a cook's tour. They see and hear about every job in a restaurant such as the cook, cleaning crew, waiter, host, cashier, parking attendant, etc. Of course, the tour ends with a pizza, tacos, or spaghetti feast.

We go to the airport to learn about planes, flight attendants, mechanics, security, etc. Sadly, I never could convince airport managers to give the kids a plane ride.

We even cross the border to go to the San Diego Zoo to learn about the animal care, animal training, zoo maintenance, bus driving, and Spanish-speaking tour guides. Of course we go to Disneyland just for the fun of it. But, I am sure, at the end of the day, there is some child saying, "I want to be Mickey Mouse when I grow up."

The kids' favorite trip is to the beach. Here I teach letters and numbers using the sand as my blackboard. I also give swimming classes. The end of the day finishes with fresh water showers from sprinklers across the street from the beach.

Cristina Marselli from Connecticut volunteers for the summer camp program. (She still comes every summer to run the camp.)

February 1984: My parents visit me in Mexico. My father, who didn't quite agree with my leaving a paying job to work as a volunteer dump teacher in Mexico, says while he is at the dump surrounded by my kindergarten students who are watching him sketch a ship on a drawing board, "David, now I understand why you are here."

June 1984: The plan was to return to New York. But I feel as though I am just beginning. So, I request a second year's leave of absence and it is granted.

I receive a grant Saint James Elementary School in Seaford, Long Island, where I had taught for one year to take four students to New York for Christmas. My entire family is thrilled. (Various grants continue for three years to take my students to New York and Sacramento. This program ended when stricter requirements to enter the United States were enforced by the American Consulate.)

June 1985: My third year's leave of absence is granted. I build our first one-room schoolhouse and medical clinic with funds donated by Anne Otterson of San Diego. (In the future she becomes a major fund-raiser for my work.) I hire a Doctor Adela Moreno to work part time in the medical clinic.

Ramon, an 11-year-old student of mine, arrives at my door with a brown bag full of clothing. He needs a place to stay. I believe it is temporary.

June 1986: The lure of Tijuana is too much and I resign from my tenured track teaching position on Long Island.

We build a home for a blind couple whose house went up in flames as the wife was cooking dinner. With our continued financial support to this family of four children, the oldest girl will graduate from college in 2003, becoming a teacher. Her dad continues to sing on buses to earn a living.

I hire Jorge to build another medical clinic and classroom in another poor neighborhood, Colonia Guadalajara, which Doctor Adela operates, too.

We build a home for a bedridden crippled lady who was living in a dirt floor tin hovel.

Eight teenagers from the dump move into Responsibility's home so they can go to school. This was not planned. It just happened. This home remains open for 10 years to 21 teenagers who, at various times, need a place to live and want to go to school. It only became unnecessary when the old dump got electricity, and public transportation became accessible.

Year 1987: We build a third medical clinic and classroom in yet another poor neighborhood right near where I live in Colonia Terazas. The clinic is operated by Project Concern. I teach English. The Department of Social Services uses the classroom to teach various health, prenatal care, and nutrition classes.

June 1988: A proud day: Dionisio and Tomas from the dump, who live in our home to attend the secondary school in my neighborhood, graduate. They are the first dump dwellers to accomplish that feat.

We help Mother Teresa's order of nuns set up their new mission, taking over an area where we have a medical clinic.

Year 1989: Responsibility is incorporated as a United States 501 C 3 nonprofit organization.

Felipe, one of my former English class students from the dump, gets a job as an English teacher in a private school in Tijuana.

Years 1990 and '91: Bill O'Reilly and INSIDE EDITION air segments six times on "The Glass Children" (the children of the dump) in a one-year period. This is how I meet most of you.

From the funds raised through Bill O'Reilly and INSIDE EDITION, we build an elementary school at the NEW dump. The old garbage dump where I began working 10 years earlier has grown from 35 families in 1980 to 200. The city government closes the municipal dump, making it illegal to discard garbage here. People still continue to work the dump, digging in the mounds of dirt that cover the landfill looking for glass.

Mother Teresa visits the dump and describes the inhabitants as "the world's most destitute."

Felipe joins me, teaching English and preschool at both the old and new dump and in Colonia Terazas. Those blue tarps are put to use again. In Colonia Terazas, Felipe makes a make-shift classroom on the cement roof of the medical clinic. At the new dump, he uses two tarps, one for a floor to cover the dirt and dust and the other as roof to block the sun.

Year 1992: Our new school is complete and ready for the beginning of the school year. I hire another teacher to teach preschool. One Mexican college student living in our home while enrolled at a Tijuana university teaches literacy in the late afternoons. Felipe teaches preschool and English in Colonia Terazas and the old dump.

I meet with the Mexican Department of Education and ask them to send teachers to the new dump. I am told that I need to prove the kids would go to school for two years. If they do attend, the department of education will take over.

Home Depot donates the building materials for us to construct another medical clinic.

Sister Teresa Jaramillo (who is still working with me today) joins me as the teacher of our kindergarten class.

Year 1994: The Mexican public school authorities accept my donation of our school and open an accredited primary school. Having remodeled the medical clinic making it a school, we continue to fully operate the preschool/ kindergarten. (Another nonprofit organization opened a medical clinic nearby: therefore, our clinic was no longer

necessary). I hire another teacher. Sister Teresa starts her own group, The Women's Cooperative Center.

Summer 1995: Allison and Skip McElvery and friends from Georgia come and build our new kindergarten school.

Year 1997: The O'Reilly Factor airs a segment on Responsibility.

Year 1998: Frank and Lorraine Petrosky from Pennsylvania, who have been supporting the my work since they saw the segment on Inside Edition in 1990, visit the children's school in the Tijuana city dump and that evening at our annual fund raising dinner, pledge \$26,000 to purchase a brand new school van. (They were attending the event to receive an award for their previous donation of \$10,000.)

1999 - 2001. We open a computer school for all the children. I am the instructor for two years. Then others take over. Lily and Felipe now are teachers in the preschool and kindergarten.

I meet Larry Heimgartner, a playwright from Harbor College, Los Angeles. He tells me he would like to write a musical about my work. We will meet for three years discussing my adventures as he progresses with the play.

I meet Actress Susan Sarandon who has been a generous supporter of my work. She tells me she is going to pass the word onto her friend, Designer Todd Oldham. The following year, The Target Corporation, on behalf of Todd Oldham, donates \$10,000.

Year 2000: Because of increased enrollment, we open an afternoon session in our school. Two more teachers are hired.

Year 2002-'03: Responsibility, the musical, opens at Harbor College. I will admit that I never did believe this play would ever come to fruition. Now it is opening and I think no one will attend. I don't believe anyone will be interested in the story.

I am proved completely wrong. More than 3,000 people attend the show. And I am amazed at the professionalism of the performance and how close to my real experience Larry kept the story.

Year 2004: We build our first "real" bathrooms. Since there is no running water at the dump - it is delivered in trucks - we have a cistern above the bathroom structure. Our lesson plans for the beginning of the school year include how to use a bathroom.

Year 2005: I meet with Actress Susan Sarandon in New York City to discuss her support of our work. As a bonus, I also learn a great deal about the movie industry.

I meet with Bill O'Reilly who offers to attend a fund-raiser in the summer if we will have one. Unfortunately, I can't accept his generous offer because most of the people who help me put the event together (schools, social service clubs, churches) aren't available to help in the summer. We end our meeting with him making a big donation. To this day, Mr. O'Reilly is Responsibility's biggest donor.

The Gap Foundation (Banana Republic, Gap, Old Navy) pledge \$21,000 for the school year 2005-06.

Today: I am now 53 and still here as you know from all the newsletters you receive. But my hair is gone. My face has the etching of 25 years teaching in very unhealthy conditions, making me appear older than my age, just like the scavengers of the dump.

I am absolutely fluent in garbage dump Spanish. They have their own dialect. I still have difficulty speaking with highly educated Mexicans such as lawyers and professors, but heck, I have difficulty understanding their American counterparts speaking in my native language. So I don't fret about this.

Over the years, we have built 35 homes, three medical clinics with classrooms attached and three schools. Today, one of those clinics is still serving an average of 800 patients a month. The government continues to give health classes there. The others have become community centers or schools.

The elementary school which we donated to the Mexican government has approximately 250 students a year. Our kindergarten, which is located next door, has 100. We have provided education to approximately 6,000 Mexican students in the past 25 years and over 10,000 United States students. (Our school provides United States students to opportunity to do social service work, student teaching, and classroom field work.)

Cristina Marselli LaRosa continues to come every summer. Sister Teresa still has her women's group and has built a community center with a child care center, a cafeteria, and a hair cutting salon to teach the women of the community a job skill. Her cafeteria provides the lunches for the students.

Jorge is still my right-hand person. He has been working with me for 18 years. Felipe continues to be our preschool and English teacher at the dump. He is also now the assistant director of Responsibility. And our school teachers are Profesoras Lili, Mari, and Laura. They have all been working with me for five years or more. Jaime has been our computer instructor for three years.

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So now you know why those 25 years have flown by so quickly. Of course, it is only through your generosity of time and money that we have been able to do so much for the children of the Tijuana dumps. For that, the children, the teachers and I give you our humble thanks.