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“Remember that when you leave this earth you can take nothing of what you have received, but only what you have given...” -St. Francis of Assisi

Dear Friends,

She was serving. I am reminded of her now having just celebrated the feast of St. Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus in the Gospels. Like Martha, Maria Morales was busy. A 27 year-old, single mother, she had risen early along with four other women to help prepare the banquet we were celebrating in my home that evening. We had a special guest.

I had invited Karin Reichensperger numerous times to Santiago Ixcán. Karin, my friend and director of a non-profit organization – The Message Program - had supplied our puesto de salud (community health clinic) with a pick-up load of supplies ranging from a hospital bed to sterile gloves delivered two years in a row. “The people would love to meet you and thank you,” I’d say. But in the 14 years that I had known her, she would not commit. “It’s far away, and I’m busy...” she’d explain. It *was* far (she was based out of Guatemala City) and I knew she *was* busy (over the top). So it was a surprise when I received a phone call from her the Monday of Holy Week this year and she informed, “I’ll be coming on Thursday.”

Karin drove the 12 hours from Guatemala City in break-neck speed swooshing into the Ixcán in half the usual time - a record according to my books! Stuffed into a four wheel drive pickup four members of the puesto de salud committee and I met her and her two male coworkers in Playa Grande after she had dropped off some clothing and supplies at an orphanage there. That was Karin – the speed and the generous giving. She wasn’t going to waste a trip to not give something to someone!

The next evening, the mayor, other prominent leaders of our community, and committee members of the puesto de salud sat around two long wooden tables by candlelight in the patio of my home. It was Good Friday of all days and as Karin was determined to leave the next morning we were unable to observe the usual Lenten fast but rather as good Catholics substituted meat for grilled fish served with rice, salad and tortillas. It was delicious. Maria and her companions had worked hard!

One by one, the leaders stood and honored Karin, thanking her for the work and generous donations to help our village and surrounding area. She sat smiling, gracious and silent, but at the end of their speeches exhorted, “Use what you have been given wisely.”

We weren't the only people Karin helped. Her big heart, indomitable spirit, and outstretched hands reached all across Guatemala supplying fire stations, hospitals, and clinics with needed equipment and goods gathered from U.S.A. surplus. In addition, she connected the materially poor with health care specialists in Guatemala City and international health care organizations offering services at lower or no cost. Thus, people who would never be able to afford surgery or other specialized procedures were able to access that kind of health care. Like Maria.

I watched Maria serve that evening and finally sit down with the rest of us to eat. Then after eating, (in accordance with the traditional role of women in the culture) she washed dishes and swept floors in sync with the other women present in a flurry of efficiency and spic and span in the wake of the big meal and the mess. They wouldn't let me help. Sitting there I remembered.

Since birth, Maria had a tumor of some sort growing on the top, front of her head. Throughout the years, she and her parents had consulted various doctors in Playa Grande and naturalists in the area and had been told that she needed surgery to remove it. That's where the search stopped. The family didn't know where to go or have the economic resources to pay for surgery. So, Maria lived with it causing her increased problems and pain especially in times of extreme heat (we live in a tropical rainforest) and when she would carry weighty loads on top of her head as is the customary method of hauling heavy items (like wet clothing hand-washed at the river) from one place to another.



Maria before surgery.

Then the proverbial light bulb switched to ON... I called Maria to sit with me at the kitchen table. "Karin," I called her. "Could you come here for a minute? There's someone I want you to see." She had us wait, finishing a conversation with one of the men and then sat down with us. "Look at this," I pointed to Maria's head and the tumor, "It's been there since birth. Any ideas?" Karin rose from the chair and examined the tumor like a seasoned doctor. "I've seen something like this before. It will require a plastic surgeon to remove. Let me look into it and see what I can do. Give me a few months." She wrote Maria's name and data into a notebook and said she would get back to me.

Before Maria left that night we looked at each other and smiled. "We'll see what happens in 6 months or so! we concluded. Maria was hopeful.

On the morning of Holy Saturday Karin left us as fast as she had arrived. None of us knew then that we would never see Karin again.

Two weeks later she called and informed, "Two plastic surgeons will be in Joyabaj, Quiche, soon and they can do the surgery! Tell Maria this is an opportunity for her!"

Maria and her mother, Teresa, left Santiago Ixcan in the early morning a few days later with a referral letter on behalf of Ixcan Ministries and money for transportation I had given her. Her father Lazaro joined them a day later on the morning of the surgery in Joyabaj.

I received a call from Lazaro the afternoon of the surgery day. He said my name and sounded as though he was crying. My God, has something bad happened bad to Maria? I worried. "What happened! Is Maria O.K.?" I asked. "She's alive. The surgery was a success," he barely could talk. "Thank God!" I responded tears in my eyes.

Shortly after her return to the village, Maria with her parents came to my home in the evening to visit - they were beaming! She took off the bandage and showed me the incision. The tumor,(I later learned called a benign sebaceous cyst) was gone! She was so grateful to Karin and to me and to Helps International – the US/ Guatemala City based organization who coordinates and brings surgeons to Guatemala from the U.S. to do surgeries for the poor. To Maria the surgery was a long answer to prayer. She felt that God had worked a miracle.

The evening before I left for the U.S. in June, Maria came to say good-bye. She entered my room where I was packing and presented me with a beaded ring she had made and placed it on my finger... and then she sobbed in my arms. "I have suffered for 27 years with this tumor and now it is gone." I didn't know what to say. Overwhelmed I repeated, "it was God, Karin and the doctors. Thank God for Karin and the doctors..."

I left the village the next morning and arrived into the U.S. on June 18th.

On July 12th in Mandan, ND I received a phone call from a friend in Antigua Guatemala. I could hear in her voice something was wrong. "What's wrong? What happened?" I asked. In a distressed and sad voice she said, "Karin is dead." And the world stopped.

On July 11th Karin had surgery in Guatemala City for debilitating migraines that had plagued her for years. There was a complication and she died.

Karin was only 41 years old. She left her mark in the lives of so many: the firefighters, the children, the women and men she helped in numerous and varied ways. Maria is just one life who was changed through her dedication and selfless service.

Might she hear the words of Jesus, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...for I was hungry and you gave me food; thirsty and you gave Me drink; sick and you visited Me..."

Rest in Peace my friend.

On behalf of Maria Morales and the many others who our ministry touches – thank you for your prayers and financial support! May God bless you and yours.

Sincerely,



Kathy Snider



Karin Reichensperger



Visit www.themessageprogram for more information into the non-profit organization that Karin established.

Check a web browser for St Cloud Times July 12, 2012 for photos of Karin and the Message Program.

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Ixcán Ministries provides a prayerful, pastoral presence through lay missionaries living in solidarity with the poor of the remote Ixcán jungle of Guatemala to learn from as well as to assist both spiritually and materially the people with whom life and ministry are shared. The organization strives to be a bridge between two cultures and nations allowing for the exchange of varying gifts between the rich and poor for the ultimate purpose of empowerment and transformation of lives and society.

Ixcán Ministries is a 501(c) 3 organization. Your contributions are tax deductible. You may contact us at:

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