



Cynthia Drake prepares for surgery. Drake is a registered nurse of 44 years and has worked with the Thousand Smiles program for 13 years.

All Smiles in Mexico

Women donate time to program that helps fix facial deformities

By Erica Rodriguez
Special to the Record

Cynthia Drake manages church relations for her home parish in Wimberley as a day job, but leaves it behind for an operation room in Mexico, where she plays a bigger role.

Drake is tall, with dark hair pulled back neatly. Her desk is nearly empty save for an appointment book and vase of fresh flowers next to her computer. A smile toys with the edges of

her mouth as she remembers how she became a part the Thousand Smiles Foundation more than a decade ago.

"This is all my daughters fault," she said jokingly. "She's the reason I got into this in the first place."

The California-transplant first learned of the program at a San Diego Rotary Club luncheon, was persuaded

(See Smiles page 3C)

“You get there and you come away saying ‘I did something here.’”

— Cynthia Drake —



Terri Griffith holding a six month old that is about to undergo a surgery. Griffith describes the trips to Mexico, which

she makes with her mother, as a “life-changing event.” The group performed four surgeries in a trip last month.

• Smiles

go by her daughter and just never stopped.

"You get addicted to the feeling that this is something that really matters," she said. "So it's very hard not to sign up and go back."

Drake, a registered nurse of 44 years, has worked for the past 13 years with the Thousand Smiles Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping impoverished children receive medical care for facial deformities like cleft lips and palates. Most recently she has worked as the director of the operating room, overseeing surgeries and other medical procedures. Three years ago she introduced the program to St. Steven's Episcopal Church who since then has sent volunteers and prayers to Ensenada, Mexico, the touristy beach town less than two hours from the California border where the project operates.

"I'm able to do something with my meager talents that will help change someone's life," Drake said. "You get there and you come away saying 'I did something here.'"

The children come from all over Mexico, mostly from orphanages or families with scarcely the resources to afford a doctor's visit but learned by word-of-mouth about Thousand Smiles. Families often walk for miles or hitchhike to make it to the project site. Sometimes they are sent away if they are not healthy enough to undergo a medical procedure or if the staff is at capacity.

"Most of (volunteers) are amazed by the number of children who need care," Drake said.

Certain deformities can create more problems than others. In the case of the cleft palate, children are born with rifts in the tops of their mouths often.

The situation creates a breeding ground for ear infection when milk or food particles make their way into the wrong parts of the body. In just one weekend the project works with more than 200 children to correct deformities and provide other care.

"How can you do anything better than that?" asked Terri Griffith, Drake's daughter who regularly attends the trips with her mother. "Taking someone like that and making them a full person again - it's life-changing."

Last month, the program worked to complete four surgeries and numerous other procedures.

"I feel like it's the one thing I do in nursing where I feel needed," said Melinda Tybor, a pediatric nurse who volunteered in the May trip. "I feel valuable. These little children are precious and knowing that they will grow up free to the malformation that they were born with, it's just very rewarding."

Volunteers come with medical training and some just certified in giving a hand. The weekends are grueling, with medical staff and volunteers doing everything from manning tooth-brushing stations to genetic counseling to mopping floors.

"It's very, very rewarding and the families are very, very appreciative," Tybor said. "So much in nursing in this country is paperwork and you miss the bedside care. You get that when you're in Mexico mostly just being right there for the children."

The surgeries can do more than give the child a new smile, it can help prevent years of social stigma. Drake says she's never seen specific cases but has heard stories of children treated as less than human, locked in closets or ostracized by family members.

"These children are shunned sometimes by their own family," Drake said. "They are ignored or overlooked and it's very demeaning. It can ruin their lives."

With few exceptions, the physical change in the child often has a life-changing ripple effect into the family as well. The child's visit often ends in the arms of tearful parents, who express nothing but thanks for the work that was done.

"The parents really don't believe its going to happen," Drake said. "They see the pictures of before and after but these parents are going on faith. They're not really sure that you're going to give them back."

Drake plans on continuing working with the program for as long as she can and the other volunteers are no exception.

"As long as my services are needed I would like to go," Tybor said.

For more information log onto www.thousandsmiles.com or contact Cynthia Drake at cdrake@ststeve.org.



Hillary Nail (right) and Melinda Tybor with a patient post surgery. Both are St. Steven's Episcopal volunteers and practicing nurses. At left: A child and his mother await surgery at a local hospital in Ensenada, Mexico.