

## **Springing into service: these college students enjoy a different kind of spring break**

by Leslee Goodman

*This is the first in a four-part series on Potter's Clay, an annual service project to Mexico, which was published by the Santa Barbara News Press in the spring of 2001.*

Each spring, thousands of college youth load up their vehicles and backpacks and head south of the border in an annual migratory ritual known as "spring break." Most of those who participate in this yearly exercise seek nothing more than a week of partying and youthful excess.

A small army of Westmont college students, however, will head south of the border for an adventure-filled week of a different sort. This group will bring with them a team of doctors, dentists, and licensed contractors. They will rent flat-bed and cargo trucks on which they will load medical equipment and building materials. They will pack tents, sleeping bags, sports and musical equipment, and even a truckload of food. As they have each spring for the last 24 years, this group of Westmont students will represent a mission known as Potter's Clay. They will head across the border to do nothing less than God's work.

### **More than a quarter-century of caring**

Potter's Clay began in the spring of 1977, when two Westmont students, Gordon Aeschliman and Dave Dolan, first traveled with 11 other students to Ensenada, Mexico, to "give to the Mexican people through service, evangelism, and material donation," as the group's history explains. Since that time, a contingent of Westmont students has repeated the visit every year, bringing medical equipment, the services of healthcare professionals, donated building materials, and hundreds of willing, able-bodied young people.

They spend the week working with local pastors and churches, conducting free medical/dental clinics, working with local teams to build and repair homes, and conducting vacation Bible schools and other outreach programs for the residents of Ensenada and neighboring towns. They live for the week in a temporary tent village they have erected at Rancho Agua Viva, a church camp operated by Westmont alumni, located on the outskirts of Ensenada.

The name of their organization, "Potter's Clay," is taken from the Old Testament book of Isaiah (64:8), which reads, "We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your

hand.” Although the purpose of the trip is service, the name reflects the spirit of unity with which the trip is conducted, rather than a notion of “saving the less fortunate.” In fact, Potter’s Clay’s student leaders are clear that the giving and receiving that take place each year are mutual. The American contingent may bring the lumber and medical supplies, but its members will return home enriched in many ways.

“The purpose of our trip is to share with the people of Ensenada,” says Chelsea Guillermo, a student co-director of a recent trip. “We don’t do for them anything they can’t do for themselves. We’re there to do it with them.”

Her co-leader, Kevin Kreutz, emphasizes the importance of this distinction—for both American and Mexican participants.

“One of the primary benefits that Westmont students receive from Potter’s Clay is the realization that God’s way is not an American way, or a Mexican way. It’s much bigger than that. So many times we think that the way we do things is the *right* way, when it’s really just *our* way.”

Another benefit is a breaking of the stereotypes that relatively wealthy Americans often have about people in poverty. As Kreutz explains, “In our culture, we’re so accustomed to thinking that if a person is poor, he or she is somehow lacking as a person. We think that the poor must not be as talented, or as intelligent, or as hard-working as people who have what we have. The Potter’s Clay experience teaches the fallacy of that notion.”

In fact, Potter’s Clay participants are typically amazed and humbled by the overwhelming generosity of people so poor they may barely have a roof over their heads. Students who serve on the Village or Vacation Bible School teams will frequently have an opportunity to spend the night in the home of a local church member. It is usually the most significant experience of the trip for the young Americans.

“We stayed in a one-room household with two beds for the four people who lived there, yet our hosts insisted that we sleep in the best one,” says Emily Friesen, a Westmont alumna who accompanied several Potter’s Clay trips. “The people insist that you take the best of whatever little they have.”

Working in partnership with the people of Ensenada is also important for the trip to achieve its intended results, Kreutz and Guillermo believe.

“So many groups have gone into Mexico and started projects that no one has ever finished,” Kreutz says. “Why should they? The Mexican people never felt any ownership of them. In fact, the men would probably resent us coming in and building houses for their families, if they, too, weren’t part of the effort.”

Local doctor, pastors lead Mexican team

A major factor in Potter’s Clay’s success is the strength of the relationships the group has built over the years with residents of Ensenada. The core team of student leaders visits Ensenada during eight weekends throughout the year, in addition to the week in spring, in order to prepare for and follow-up on each spring break trip. They work with a “Mexico Core Team” of pastors, a local physician, and representatives of Rancho Agua Viva and of a local social welfare agency, to plan the group’s activities the week of Potter’s Clay.

Dr. Ramon Vidauri, the medical member of the Mexico Core Team, has been an integral part of the Potter’s Clay healthcare effort for many years. In addition to coordinating the medical and dental clinics that operate each year, he also helps each year’s group of participants obtain the permits and immigration papers necessary to enter and work in Mexico. Desarrollo Integral de la Familia, or “DIF” as it is called, a local social welfare agency, also helps to identify families in need of assistance during Potter’s Clay.

Finally, the pastors of more than a dozen churches help Potter’s Clay leaders plan each year’s activities, identify each year’s projects, organize local participants, and marshal local materials. This year, for example, Potter’s Clay construction teams will build seven homes, a church building, and a roof. They will conduct free medical/dental clinics in parts of Ensenada and neighboring towns where the people cannot afford these services. They will visit young people in prison and at a local coffee house. They will conduct sports clinics and play soccer, basketball, and volleyball with local school and church teams. They will conduct Vacation Bible School at participating local churches.

“The church in Ensenada is alive and well,” Guillermo says. “It doesn’t need us to come and minister to its members. But they are tremendously encouraged by the fact that every year we do come to be with them, as we are encouraged each year by the faith they demonstrate to us.”

In fact, the reception Potter’s Clay has earned over the years is evidenced by an official letter of invitation from the Mayor’s wife that blesses the stay of each Potter’s Clay participant.

Last year, when Guillermo and Kreutz were selected as this year's co-directors, the Mayor presented them with the keys to the city.

A logistical nightmare that miraculously comes together

The organizing of a cross-cultural trip of this size and ambition is a logistical exercise that might challenge a military expert. Yet each year, the 12 student leaders of Potter's Clay pull it off. They also work to prepare culturally and spiritually the several hundred student participants. And they marshal the efforts to raise the nearly \$100,000 necessary to fund the trip and its activities.

"From the get-go, the entire undertaking is destined to fail," smiles Kreutz, who has participated in two prior Potter's Clay trips. "Taking a group of that size, with that many vehicles and supplies, into a foreign country, it's impossible to anticipate everything. Yet the fact that it all comes together each year is a miracle. It's always amazing."

"And knowing that takes a lot of the pressure off of us," Guillermo adds. "We do our best to cover all the bases we possibly can, but we always know we have help."

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