



Magdalena Quex
Chimaltenango, Guatemala

The story begins with the hospitalito. In the beginning, it was clearly a model hospital in many ways. For me, I began working at the hospitalito in 1971. I had studied nursing through a correspondence course and one day my neighbor, who had been to the hospitalito for a consultation, suggested I work at the hospital. “Magdalena, go to Chimaltenango. There’s a gringo doctor and he has indigenous nurses. You’ve been studying nursing. Go and see about a job.” With her encouragement I talked to Dr. Behrhorst and told him I’d like to work at the hospital if he would let me. He asked to see my correspondence course papers, saw that I had passed, and said, “OK”. He excitedly said we need a nurse, but we really need you to work in the campo (countryside). Would you be willing to do that? I said “Sure, I can do that.” So half the time I worked in the campo, and half the time I worked in the hospitalito.

I lived in Patzun, but went to Chimaltenango, and then frequently walked from there to various villages. Cars weren’t usually available and couldn’t get to all the villages. The work meant going where the people were and the people in the villages were thankful for the work of Dr. Behrhorst and that we would come to their communities. Dr. Behrhorst was famous because he would serve indigenous people. We charged Q5 for a consultation, but if individuals weren’t able to pay we would provide the service for free. The same was true for medicines. The prices were low, but if an individual couldn’t pay for it he or she would still be provided the medicine. These services were a huge help to people from many, many communities. In the clinic we usually saw about 100 people per day – children, old people – between 9 am and 7 pm.

I learned lots of things from Dr. Behrhorst. His vision, and a really important lesson, was the importance of preventive health and health promotion. An important part of the work involved getting people to change their thinking about certain ideas such as preventive health. And it is hard. For example, we teach people that pure water is important for their health, and the health of their children. They say it costs a lot to have clean water, but I tell them it also costs a lot if you are sick because of the water. It is better to prevent the illness by using clean water. And then they learn.

Dr. Behrhorst was an important presence at the hospital. All the employees were important, but we all had a special affection for Dr. Behrhorst. He was kind of like a father, or like family to us. I was thankful to be working for him because it was a good environment. It was satisfying working at the hospital and in the campo. I worked in a number of villages near Chimaltenango,

Patzún, San Martín Jilotepeque, and Tecpán. We worked in preventive health. We worked a bit with the health promoters at the clinic, but not in the villages.

We increased the capacity of family health, and taught nutrition in the hospital, and maintained a small vegetable garden so we could teach about use of the vegetables to improve dietary nutrition. Now I am at home, and still preparing nutritious food.

The situation changed during the violence, and we were very fearful. We heard the news that employees of Dr. Behrhorst were killed, so of course we were scared. But nevertheless, we didn't close the clinic nor the hospital. However, we had to stop going to the campo. The impact of the violence was very serious. But the impact of the health promoters continues even today. There are at least three original health promoters I know that are still working in preventive health in some villages. They come to Chimaltenango to get the medicines. There are probably others, too. The bad thing is that they don't have contact with BPD and aren't able to continue their studies as health promoters. There were many changes after Dr. Behrhorst died.

Part of the secret to the success, and longevity of the Behrhorst work is the philosophy of working with people. We work together. This is the significance of the work, and the vision of development. We worked as a team, and this is very important. "Trabajemos – we work together" is the theme.

I worked with Behrhorst for 26 years, beginning when I was 17 years old. I feel very satisfied with the work. Now I don't work although I'm busy caring for my family. I'm very pleased my daughter is working for BPD.

My sister, Lidia is married to a gringo doctor she met when both were working at the hospitalito. Now they are living in San Francisco but she returns each year to visit family in Guatemala. One day recently she saw Heidy's picture in the BPD newsletter and called by telephone to tell me. I was surprised, but also pleased and happy.