

“What we’re supposed to do”

Couple creates nonprofit, reach out to Belize poor while wife fights a personal battle with breast cancer

BY LINDA THOMAS

Mal and Elaine Moran don’t think their accomplishments over the past few months are extraordinary.

They raised money for the purchase of 80 computers, shipped the equipment to an impoverished area of Central America, solicited support from Belize locals to install the technology in four schools, and came back to their home in Kirkland with plans for another project to help people living in poverty.

They did this, by the way, while Elaine was being treated for breast cancer.

“Anything we accomplish, it’s because God is allowing us to do it,” said Mal, whose Irish name is short for Malachy. “It’s not that big of a deal. I think it’s what we’re supposed to do.”

The Morans, members of St. James Cathedral Parish, Seattle, are like thousands of parishioners throughout the Archdiocese who volunteer to help those who are less fortunate. In their case, Mal and Elaine saw a need while on vacation three years ago and decided to do something about it.

New World Villages

They marveled at the Mayan Mountains and ancient pyramids in Belize – the only English-speaking country in Central America. Their travels also took them away from the usual tourist spots and into the villages.

“I saw someone living in a tin hut, just pieced together in a flimsy way,” Elaine recalled. “Housing was very inadequate and people had a hard time feeding their large families.” About 35 percent of the population lives in poverty and most families can only afford to send one or two of their children to school.

Images of those in need remained with the Morans, and after they returned home they established a nonprofit organization called New World Villages. The all-volunteer organization is on a mission to improve the education, health and human dignity of people in Central America.

They started small with an effort to collect used and unneeded library books from Catholic schools in Western Washington. Next, they found themselves raising funds to ship 4,000 books to Belize.



With help from Belize locals, Mal and Elaine Moran (pictured at right sitting on steps) delivered and installed 80 computers in four schools throughout the Central American country.

Photo: New World Villages

Elaine began looking for grants to further their work and became interested in the Rotary's Computers for the World project. The international program, which started in Seattle, delivers and installs donated computers to needy schools around the world.



One of the New World Villages' computer labs in the Julian Cho school in Belize. The majority of students need financial help to attend school. It costs about \$300 (U.S.) per year for student uniforms, fees, and books.



Mal and Elaine Moran, members of St. James Cathedral Parish in Seattle, collect crucifixes and crosses on their world travels.

The Morans initially raised \$2,000 “mostly from family and friends,” they said. Through matching grants from the Bellevue Rotary and Rotary International they ended up with about \$25,000.

“With that money we were able to purchase 80 refurbished computers along with fax machines, scanners, digital cameras, printers and a \$7,000 shipping container to get the equipment down there,” said Mal.

He said they had “many blessings” along the way as they planned to set up four computer labs, with 20 computers each, in four schools. They had support from the Belize Rotary, eager schools ready to receive the computers, assistance from a tech-savvy Peace Corps volunteer and guidance on many levels from a Jesuit priest working in Central America.

The world at their fingertips

The Morans also had inspiration from their own community at St. James, where more than 1,300 parishioners volunteer in 40 different ministries. Everything was ready to go. Then they found out Elaine had breast cancer.

Her first thought after hearing the news was, “I don’t have time for this.”

“I wanted to get the computer labs set up before school started,” she said. “I knew I’d have a month between surgery and radiation and that would give us enough time to go to Belize and install the computers.”

Ten days after surgery Elaine was bouncing and bumping across Belize dirt roads in a truck filled with computers for schools. Mal, who is accustomed to being behind a desk working for the financial services firm TIAA-CREF, was behind the wheel. Considering his truck driving skills, Mal said, it was “another blessing” that computers didn’t end up in pieces by the time they were delivered to schools.

It took the Morans and volunteers in Belize about 12 hours to set up each computer lab in four different areas of the country during the “roasting hot” month of July, as Mal described it.

“The labs greatly expand the educational opportunities for students,” Elaine said. “They literally have the world at their fingertips now.”

Elaine recently finished radiation treatments for cancer and won't need to go through chemotherapy. Her prognosis is good and the couple slowed down to celebrate Elaine's successful treatment with friends and family, but only for a moment.

Now they're trying to raise money for a New World Villages program called “Animals for Others.” The project offers poor villagers the training, farm animals and supplies needed to become self-reliant.

“We're just doing what we're supposed to do as Catholics. That's the bottom line for me,” Mal said. “On the other hand everybody can play a role. If you want to volunteer, if you want to donate to the effort, or if you pray for us, all of that helps.”

Want To help?

Contact New World Villages through their [website](#), or call (800) 489-8711.