

Dentist takes a bite out of poverty

Brian fulfills life with mission trips

(Editor's note: The following article features former Naples resident and Peewitt High School graduate Tom Brian. He is the son of Rebecca Brian, who lives at Fairview, Texas, and the late A. T. Brian. The story was written by Peggy Helmick-Richardson and was published in the "Allen Image" at Allen, Texas.)

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Born in Arkansas and raised in Naples, Texas, Tom Brian attended Southern State College in Magnolia, Arkansas, for three years. Originally there on a football scholarship, a knee injury in his first year forced him to leave the team his sophomore year. The fourth year he attended North Texas State University. While at Southern State he met Sharon and the two married in 1968. After graduating from the University of Texas Dental School in Houston, the Brians moved to Allen and opened a dental office on East Main Street in 1975.

The couple soon became active members of First United Methodist Church of Allen, serving on a number of boards and chairing many of them. When the Rotary Club of Allen was chartered in 1978, Tom was a founding member.

A 1991 mission trip to La Moskitia (Moskito Coast) of Honduras proved to be the turning point for Tom.

Brian also went on mission trips to Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Peru, but it was the overwhelming poverty of the Moskito people that compelled him to return to this isolated region. "That's where I saw the most need," Tom explains. "They get ignored because there are no roads there and they are cut off."

Located in the far eastern Honduran state of Gracias a Dios, La Moskitia can only be reached by airplane or boat. At first, Tom traveled to several villages in La Moskitia to provide free dental work. This required additional travel via an eight-hour boat trip down the Coco River with passengers often needing to get out and walk, toting heavy boxes of supplies.

Brian eventually focused his free dental services on the villages near the secluded community of Puerto Lempira.

The doctor recalls, "In 1991, there was no telephone service or television in Puerto Lempira, and they only had electricity from six o'clock to ten o'clock at night. The electrical generator was owned by a man who had a little hotel there, and some of the people bought the electricity from him." A year later, a satellite dish for telephones was set up, but it did little to improve service. For those early years, Tom could only reach Sharon or other U.S. resources via ham radio. Recently a cell phone tower was erected in Puerto Lempira and electricity is now available to more people for most of the day - but not always.

Recalling his first dental mission to Honduras, Tom laments, "I started out just pulling teeth and had to pull the front teeth of these two young ladies because they had decay in them. But I didn't want to pull teeth that could be saved!"

For his second trek to Honduras, he and ten other volunteers secured the necessary supplies, including an air compressor and generator, to do fillings. Of the 20 pieces of luggage in tow, only seven made it out of the United States. The rest were stolen, and again Tom had no choice but to pull teeth.

The one blessing that resulted from that catastrophe came in the form of a \$25,000 insurance check that was quickly deposited into a new mission account.

By 1995, the Brians recognized the need for a formal non-profit organization and Send Hope was born.

That same year, Tom met 11-year old Walter in La Moskitia. At age three, the boy had broken his leg falling from a tree and five years later the still unhealed wound became infected. When Tom and Walter became acquainted three years later, the bone was still infected.

Tom and Sharon brought

him to Scottish Rite Hospital in Dallas. Walter had to return to Texas two more times to complete his medical treatment, living with the Brians for a total of five years. His treatment required that his thigh be fused to his hip, leaving him with a permanent limp.

With sustenance farming being the primary occupation in La Moskitia, Tom knew this impairment meant Walter needed a good education to find a job. To make that happen, the Brians arranged for Walter to move from his isolated village to his aunt's home in Puerto Lempira. The Brian's paid the aunt \$80 a month for his room and board. Yet when they returned to Honduras the couple discovered Walter and another cousin were living unsupervised in a one-room shack. No aunt was there and Walter was failing many of his classes.

Walter wasn't the only child with limiting disabilities in La Moskitia. Among the more common Tom has seen are clubfoot, missing tibias in either one or both legs, and cleft palates. Early on, a grant from the Rotary Club allowed for a number of children to be transported to Scottish Rite for treatment. CURE International's two-doctor charitable pediatric hospital in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, opened in 2004, greatly eased this financial burden.

Repairing impairments was only part of the solution and Tom decided that building a children's home was the obvious next step. House of Hope was completed in 2005.

With each trip to Honduras, Tom returned home with more tales of adventures and needs begging to be fulfilled. Soon others became interested in this dentist's mission work and wanted to help. Some wrote checks and others traveled to Puerto Lempira,

One notable family is Mike and Marilyn Tucker and their twin daughters Meagan and Lindsey. Mike first traveled with Tom and another local volunteer Randy Moore to Puerto Lempira nine years ago to start building House of Hope. "We were there for nine days and, with eight or nine local men, were able to dig out and put down the foundation and start the walls that were three cinderblocks high," Mike recalls.

Mike has since returned to the region for nine summers and twice for one summer. After his first trip, Marilyn and their daughters tagged along to help.

"Chelma came to our family shortly after my first visit," Mike explains. "A Scottish Rite doctor had traveled down the summer before and repaired her club feet, but the operation was not successful. The doctor said if we could get her a visa And get her up to Scottish Rite, he could make the corrections on her feet."

For almost a year, the then 2-year-old Chelma lived with the Tuckers while undergoing the repairs. When the work was completed, Chelma returned to her family in Honduras.

When the Tuckers returned to Puerto Lempira the following summer, they learned Chelma had been living with her grandmother who was also raising 12 other grandchildren by herself. "The grandmother said we could have her, but we didn't have the legal right," Mike continues. "So we asked Tom if she could stay at House of Hope, and she did stay there for about six years."

Mike notes that Chelma spoke fluent English because of her year with his family and she stepped into the role of ambassador for American's visiting House of Hope. Because her skills in the Moskito dialect and Spanish were not as honed, she quickly fell behind at the village school she attended.

Wanting to see Chelma succeed, Send Hope and the Tuckers were able to acquire a five-year educational visa for her. Mike emphasizes, "Usually Honduras education visas, so this is evidence that God has his hand in this."

Chelma arrived back at the Tucker home three years ago and was enrolled in Willow

Bend Academy in Plano. Tom notes that obtaining her visa required them to secure an I-20 form that can only be given by private schools, so placing Chelma in the Allen School District was not an option.

After three years, the now sixth grade Chelma has caught up in her studies. When queried as to what the Moskito girl will choose to do when her five-year visa expires, Mike replies, "We are leaving that up to Chelma. She is very happy where she is right now but we ask her about it often because we don't want to take her away from her roots."

Mike also points out that working with Send Hope had a significant influence on his daughters' career choices. Lindsey is now studying nursing in Tyler and Meagan is completing her degree in community development at Texas A&M.

Retired four years ago as the director of store interior design for JC Penney, Mike also offers his assistance to Send Hope locally as well. Much of this work involves Send Hope's nutrition program through Kids Against Hunger, an effort of Feeding Children International.

Brian explains that this program was added to Send Hope's work after witnessing the countless devastating effects of malnutrition in the Moskito villages. "I had seen little ones so malnourished that their skin looked like that of an old person," he sighs. "The hospital puts them on an IV and once they're healthy enough, they send them to us. We feed them and get them really healthy. Some stay with us permanently and some go back to their parents if they want them and can afford to feed them. We are feeding about 200 malnourished babies a month" and spend \$500 a month just for formula."

Tom shares an account of a mother with 11 children and none of the fathers being physically or financially responsible for their welfare - an all too-frequent scenario in this impoverished region. "There were twins brought in and one of them died," he recounts. "The mother would come get milk for the babies but she was dividing it up with the other children in the family."

In response to this problem, the Allen Kiwanis Club teamed up with Kids Against Hunger to form a satellite group to aid Send Hope. Developed in Minnesota, the Kids Against Hunger non-profit organization creates six-serving packages of a nutrient-dense casserole comprised of rice, soy, and dehydrated vegetables, enriched with an essential vitamin and mineral powder.

This project soon became Sharon's bailiwick and has blossomed.

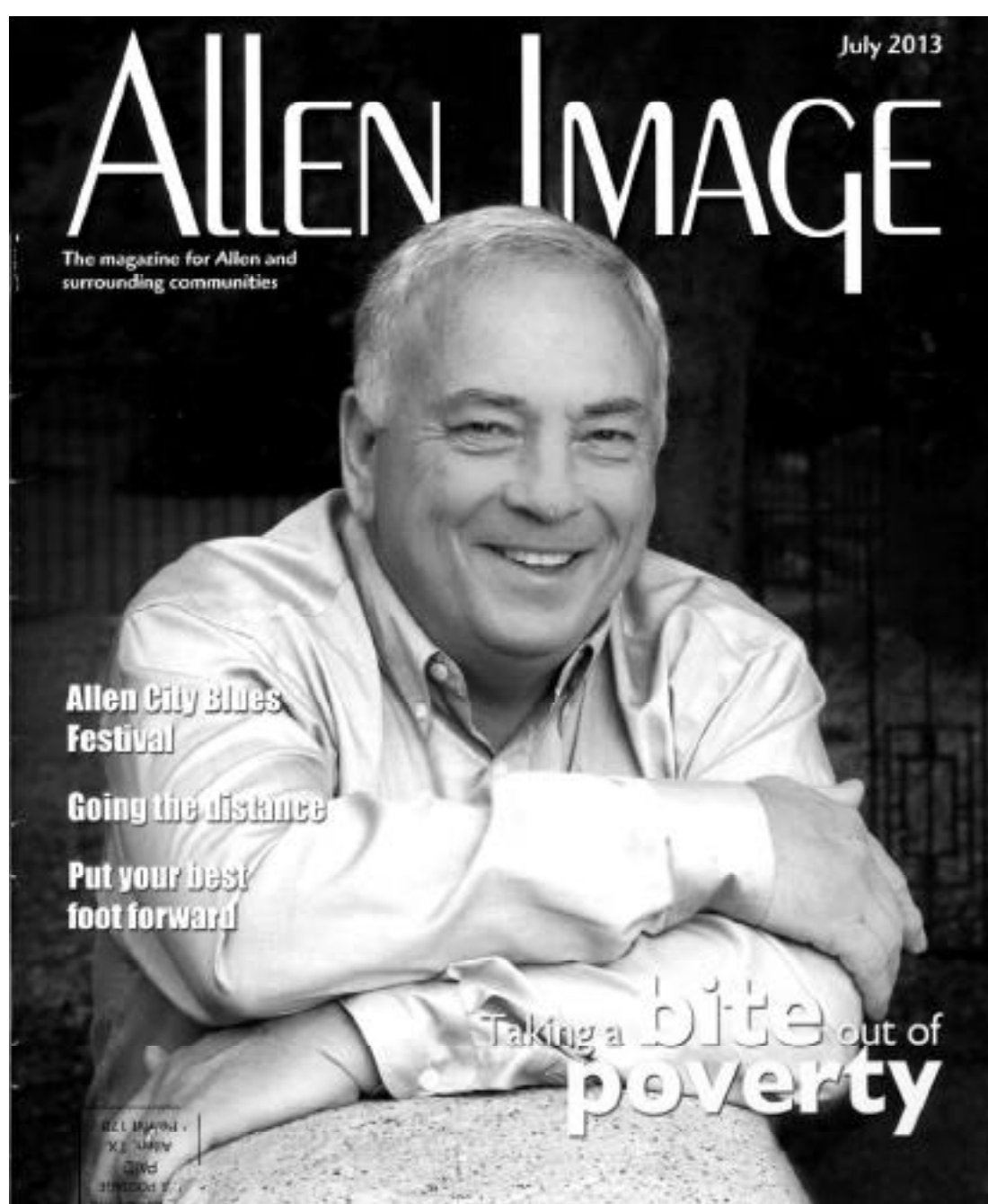
In mid-May, the Brian's had 1,000 boxes of Kids Against Hunger meals stored at their home awaiting pick-up and delivery to La Moskitia. Each of the boxes contains 366-serving sacks. Almost half of these were filled during a Change the World weekend at First United Methodist Church of Allen with a number of area service organizations assisting. "We packed 91,800 meals and it liked to killed me!" Tom laughs.

Tom said that many other North Texas groups have sponsored days to fill sacks and pack boxes for the Kids Against Hunger project. "I think the Presbyterian kids in Sherman packed about 400 boxes," he notes. "The groups that pack, buy the ingredients. It's like 25-cents a meal and that covers the shipping. "Other than the rice, all packaging and ingredients are ordered from the Minnesota-based organization.

The growth of Send Hope meant the need for additional help, and for each need an answer was provided.

Describing herself as a "surrogate mother," Katrina Engle has managed the House of Hope for the orphans and disabled and/or malnourished children in the region since its opening.

In 1990, a then-19-year-old Katrina arrived in La Moskitia to live and work with a missionary family. A plane accident in 1993 re-



TOM BRIAN FEATURED ON ALLEN MAGAZINE COVER

quired her to come back to the United States, where she met and married Roger Engle and had two sons, Roger and Christian. The family returned to Honduras in 1997, settling in Puerto Lempira in 2000 to run a small clinic and pharmacy. The couple soon offered a permanent home to first a local boy, Selvin, and later a girl, Victoria.

Graduating as a Honduran Licensed Practical Nurse, Katrina began volunteering at the local hospital. "I started to collect children from the pediatric ward," she shares. "Children who were at risk for infection at the hospital, malnourished children and children with burns would come to stay with us until they were better. "Katrina also hunted down non-profit medical organizations that provided surgical treatment for children with disabilities.

Katrina recalls meeting Tom in 2001 when he began providing assistance for the children she was helping. "I had about 12 children in my home, including my then three, and Tom mentioned that he wanted to open a children's home where the handicapped children we were collecting could live and continue their education.

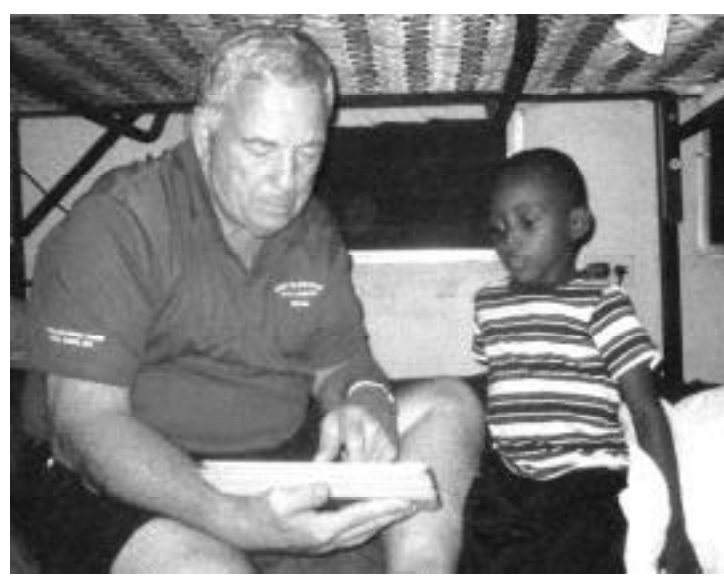
"I explained that I felt running a children's home was the purpose God had sent me to La Moskitia for in the first place and I would love to be a part of that vision," Katrina continues. That dream came to fruition when the 16-bedroom, eight bathroom House of Hope opened in 2005, with Mama Miriki (the moniker the children dubbed Katrina that means "American mother") keeping things running smoothly.

Two years later, retired cardiologist Dr. Marianne Serkland arrived to offer her medical expertise. "She was helping a group from Minnesota called International Health Service and decided to move [to Honduras]," Tom states. "So we asked her if she wanted to help us."

Because the local school was not accessible for many of the Send Hope children, the next building project for Tom was the two-classroom school built in 2006. Today, plans are now being made to build four more classrooms and convert the original school to boys housing.

In 2007, the Guest House for visiting missionaries and volunteers was completed. After operating out of an 18-wheeler for several years, the dental clinic and three storage rooms were constructed in 2008.

Today, Tom estimates that the home currently houses 35 permanent children and 10 temporary children, with 50 children attending the school. In addition, 200 malnourished babies and 800 to 1,000 underfed children are provided much needed nutrient-rich food.



BRIAN VISITS WITH A FRIEND IN LA MOSKITIA

Another recent achievement for Tom is bringing Habitat for Humanity to La Moskitia. The organization was in Honduras but because of the inaccessibility of this region and the expense of delivering materials, no housing projects had been started there. Initially approaching the Dallas Habitat for Humanity for assistance in getting better housing for the people in this isolated area, Tom had to round up three confirmed Habitat for Humanity teams from the U.S. as well as secure support from the Honduran Habitat for Humanity. Soon, the North Collin County Habitat for Humanity offered to provide some of the needed funding via their required tithe to the international organization.

Tom sold his Allen dental practice and retired in 2011, providing him greater opportunity to share Send Hope's story, raise more money and spend more time in La Moskitia. I've been going down there every six weeks for a long time, but when I was working I could only stay for a week at a time," he points out. "Now I stay for two to three weeks and sometimes almost a month, and last year I was there almost all summer."

The number of American volunteers arriving at Send Hope's doors has gradually grown as well, and with each additional helper, at least one more Miskito child takes a step away from poverty.

"We are sending \$10,000 a month down there to run the place, and that includes the feeding program and transportation program for medical needs, plus paying the employees, food and electricity," Tom emphasizes. In addition to two teachers, the other employees include a cook, night and day nannies, and someone to do laundry. Katrina Engle and Dr. Marianne Serkland donate their services.

"The major funding comes from individuals," Tom adds. "If you're doing what God wants, He provides it." As an example, he shares a story of how House of Hope was built. "People were giving me money ... and we eventually

had \$50,000 in the bank. So we started building the children's home. I had no idea how much it was going to cost ... and if I knew then what I know now, I might have been too afraid to build it. I would take \$10,000 down every six weeks to buy materials and pay the workers.

But when we ran out of the \$50,000 I had to tell Leonardo, the guy who was running [the construction], to stop after that because we were out of money.

"But when I came back to Allen, a lady wrote me a check for \$8,000, somebody gave me a check for \$500, and I got \$100 here and \$100 there.

When it was time to go back in six weeks, I had another \$10,000." He concludes that this serendipitous funding pattern continued until the home was completed.

Today, Walter, the young boy who had his long-infected leg repaired at Scottish Rite 17 years ago, is one of Send Hope's success stories. Married and with a little girl who affectionately calls Tom "Abuelo" (grandfather), Walter works as the day watchman for Send Hope and is an artist, painting and carving items to sell to tourists.

His achievements and ability to rise above the poverty he was born into recently earned him an award from the Honduran president, Porfirio Lobo Sosa.

Katrina sums up the inspiring achievements of Send Hope with her personal observation: "Every baby we rescue who would have been dead and is not, to me is a success. Every child that can smile, and can eat and not drink without the food running out his nose, and can talk without a horrible speech impediment is a success. Every child that can walk and run and play instead of being confined to a bed or a wheel chair to me is a success. Every child that can go to bed without the fear of hunger or being beaten or violated to me is a success."

For more information on Send Hope, go to its website www.sendhope.org. You can also follow Katrina's day-to-day adventures on her blog www.mamamiriki.wordpress.com.