

Hospital Help

By Melanie Threlkeld McConnell

What war and earthquakes have destroyed in El Salvador, Boise State student Heather McArthur is working to rebuild.

The 20-year-old history and pre-med major with family ties to the small Central American country recruited 13 fellow Boise State students to volunteer at the Benjamin Bloom Children's National Hospital in San Salvador.

The group delivered medical supplies, toys and quilts made by members of McArthur's church. And they painted the walls of the children's rooms and performed other odd jobs to improve the hospital environment for the staff and the young patients.

The students were accompanied by McArthur's mother, Maria, along with Meridian dentist Rodney Brady and his wife, Shelee.

But it was McArthur, whose mother is from El Salvador, who organized the 10-day trip following her own volunteer service at the hospital last summer.

"After a month and a half there, I realized there were more needs than clothes and toys," she says, running down the list of much-needed basics such as hospital gowns, incubators and computers. The hospital was still suffering from a devastating earthquake in 1986 that nearly destroyed its pathology department and a 12-year civil war that left many of its walls full of bullet holes.

Determined to fulfill her pledge to help the hospital, McArthur started the non-profit Children's Dream Foundation shortly after returning home to support her efforts to raise cash, supplies and support for the hospital. Word spread of her mission and soon donations started flowing in from friends, family and church members in Utah, California, Washington and Oregon.

For Mike McKinnon, a Boise State sophomore art major who put his talent to work drawing and painting Sesame Street characters on the hospital's walls, the trip was worth the personal monetary expense.

"The hospital was a little depressing. It was dirtier than I expected and there were more insects than I expected," he says. "But it was a good experience. It opened our eyes that not everyone lives the way we do."

Shelee Brady was struck by the altruism of the El Salvadoran medical staff, including its medical students.

"There's not a lot of money in medicine down there in terms of doctors' fees and reimbursement," she says. "They seem to do it just because they love to help the children."

The Bradys accepted the invitation to join the group when their son, who speaks fluent Spanish, was unable to go. The idea of traveling with college students was appealing, Shelee Brady says.

For McArthur, who hopes to attend Stanford Medical School to become a pediatric cardiologist, helping the children heal from various ailments was all too personal. In 1990, when she was 12, doctors used a new surgical procedure to repair a heart defect.

McArthur had another goal in mind when she enlisted the help of her fellow students for the volunteer trip. "I wanted every one of them to lose themselves in the service," she says. "I wanted

them to have an experience they will never forget."

It worked for McKinnon.

"A lot of the motivation to go was to get away from Boise and school for a while," he says. "But once you got there you forgot that. You saw the kids and the conditions they lived in."

And, he adds, "I cemented some friendships with people I hadn't known well and I made new friends as well."

McArthur plans to return to the hospital in June accompanied this time by several Boise orthopedic surgeons who plan to donate their time to the patients.

She says she believes that the earlier young people begin volunteering, the better. "If you can open their eyes at a young

age, you can raise a generation of more responsible and generous people," she says. □



PHOTO COURTESY RODNEY BRADY



PHOTO COURTESY JENNIFER BORUP

Above, Heather McArthur, left, and Kim Bigelow with a young patient. Left, Mike McKinnon and Kendra Botkin decorate the hospital walls.