

International Boutique benefits women and children's programs universally

Another year of hurricanes and earthquakes, disaster relief and development projects – and it was once again time to leave for our annual trip of meetings and shopping for the International Boutique. This year we were facing responding to unimaginable destruction across the southern part of the country, the Caribbean and Puerto Rico from Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria, as well as two earthquakes in Mexico.

POWER ON PUERTO RICO

The Power on Puerto Rico initiative had just begun, with Amurtel partnering with Amicus to bring portable solar charging stations to the rural areas hardest hit. But knowing Patty Giometti, Nancy Wilson Rhoads and Nils and Sonia Behn from The Valley were on task and moving the

sional everything was. From the receptionist juggling phone calls, doing intake of three different families, and answering questions from others, to each staff member focusing on their area of responsibility. Lactation consultants, doulas, midwives, social workers, child trauma specialists and the bookkeeper, grant writers, etc., all working in six small rooms. One reason the project is so successful is they keep to their mandate of focusing specifically on pre- and postnatal care, infant support up to age 2, nutrition, counseling and distribution of necessary items. Instead, all the NGOs in the area work closely to refer to each other according to their expertise. So Amurtel gets a continual flow of moms and babies, seeing up to 700 to 800 a month, and helping women



Aid for earthquake victims in Mexico.



An artists market in Athens, Greece.

project ahead left me free to focus on the trip ahead.

Our first stop was Athens, Greece, where we spent a week visiting and working with staff at the Amurtel Mothers and Babies project. Begun in 2015, Mothers and Babies was a response to the wave of refugees flooding Greece from Syria and other war-torn countries. Many of these mothers had either just given birth, were about to give birth or, in a few instances, actually in labor as they floundered off the inflatable boats and struggled to shore. Fleeing bombing and ground fire, families arrived with only the clothes on their backs, clutching their children's hands as they desperately tried to find safety for their families. Initially working in the camps, Amurtel moved into permanent quarters in Athens last year after the borders were closed, finding it easier to maintain ongoing relationships with the families staying on.

Having been in their offices for only a year, I was amazed at how organized and profes-

sional everything was. From the receptionist juggling phone calls, doing intake of three different families, and answering questions from others, to each staff member focusing on their area of responsibility. Lactation consultants, doulas, midwives, social workers, child trauma specialists and the bookkeeper, grant writers, etc., all working in six small rooms. One reason the project is so successful is they keep to their mandate of focusing specifically on pre- and postnatal care, infant support up to age 2, nutrition, counseling and distribution of necessary items. Instead, all the NGOs in the area work closely to refer to each other according to their expertise. So Amurtel gets a continual flow of moms and babies, seeing up to 700 to 800 a month, and helping women

find other organizations that can assist with housing, etc.

FEELING OF FAMILY

Entering into the suite of rooms, there is an immediate feeling of family – little ones quietly playing in the toy room, moms visiting with each other as they nurse their babies, some waiting to see the midwife for a follow-up visit. The women come in all sizes, colors and attire and speak various languages. We have two translators on staff, but a lot of communication happens in the universal language of hand gestures, smiles and hugs. These women come from cultures where family offers a strong safety net for new moms and now they were living in a country where they don't understand the language and have no extended family. Some of the personal stories I heard broke my heart – so much suffering and also so much courage and hope. Having a group like Mothers and Babies to turn to has made all the difference for thousands of women.

After spending time with the program team, of course,

we had to go shopping for the boutique. This meant diving into small side streets off busy markets, finding hand creams made from donkey milk (apparently there are a lot of donkeys in Greece), and scop-

ing out an artists' market up near the Acropolis. Breathtaking views and a sense of deep history accompanied us throughout our time in the city. We were sad to leave Greece – the people so warm and friendly, the Mothers and Babies project so inspiring and, of course, the food!

INDIA

On to India and meetings with other Amurtel directors from around the world, and reviewing programs right in India itself, focusing on the needs of the rural poor, including health care, education and reversing malnutrition. Three of our team from Kenya met us in Delhi for a continuation of discussions begun during my visit there in the spring, on how to address the continuing famine and resultant malnutrition. Our spirulina farms and distribution seem to be making a difference, but it is a drop in the bucket of what needs to be done. We reviewed data showing improved health and mental alertness among the children we are treating and discussed increasing our response. At one point I was struck by the irony of talking about fighting malnutrition in

the Horn of Africa while sitting in New Delhi, India. And realizing these are universal problems – if we can solve them in one country, we can solve them globally.

And I do believe these challenges can be met and overcome. Amurtel has been working with women and children, with families from all walks of life, for over 40 years now, and I have come to believe that if we defy indifference, reach out and harness our collective capacity as a society, we can see again healthy communities, happy children, hopeful families, in places despair once ruled. It is not a trivial task, and it is not one that can be ignored. We can make a difference; it is first a matter of caring, of recognizing our individual potential and of believing in the resilience of the human spirit. I believe hope will always triumph.

I invite you all to this year's International Boutique, December 2 to 9 at the Masonic Lodge on Route 100 in Waitsfield. We will be selling all the beautiful things from this and other trips made throughout the year. The profits will support programs for women and children here in Vermont and around the world.



Joni Zweig, center, shopping for the International Boutique in Kenya.