

East Naples woman's work has meant dozens of wheelchairs for Latin America

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Unable to walk, 15-year-old Pascual Lopez Mendoz, had been carried on his mother's back his entire life.

One day last fall, a stranger visited Pascual's hometown of Canton Cruz, Guatemala, and brought him an unforgettable gift.

While most American children of Pascual's age enjoy video games, checking out the latest compact discs and going to the movies, Pascual was thrilled the day he received a \$75 donated wheelchair to get around.



East Naples resident Penny Rambacher, a member of Airline Ambassadors International, was the good Samaritan who made it possible for Pascual to get the new wheels — something he and hundreds of his fellow Mayans never even knew existed.

Penny Rambacher, a member of Airline Ambassadors International, has made frequent trips to Central America for the past three years delivering wheelchairs and other medical supplies such as walkers and crutches to poor people in need of assistance. Rambacher is scheduled to return Guatemala at the end of the month to deliver more wheelchairs she has received from the community.
Lexey Swall/Staff

Rambacher was moved emotionally to learn of Pascual's situation and of so many others living in countries in need of wheelchairs.

So, she began a wheelchair drive.

"I imagined the frustration of a mother who wants to care for her children and provide for her children and then knowing no way to do so," Rambacher said. "I felt there was an angel action or divine intervention for me to find a wheelchair to give to Pascual."

Airline Ambassadors is a nonprofit organization comprised of flight attendants, retirees, teachers and ordinary citizens from around the world that offers humanitarian aid to the hungry and impoverished people of nations such as Guatemala, Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and El Salvador.

Rambacher, a longtime registered dietitian, is a flight attendant with AmericanAirlines.

For the past three years, Rambacher through Airline Ambassadors has provided more than 100 wheelchairs to the poor of Central America.

Rambacher buys the new wheelchairs for \$75 a piece from Wheelchair Foundation, a California-based charity with a storage center in Fort Lauderdale.



Pascual Lopez Mendoz, 15, right, who is partially blind and unable to walk, has been carried on his mother's back his entire life. Now Pascual and his mother are both a little more independent with the help of a wheelchair delivered by Penny Rambacher. "(A wheelchair) changes their lives instantly," Rambacher said. Photo courtesy Penny Rambacher

She has been able to do that thanks to financial contributions from the community and organizations such as the Naples Bay Rotary Club, Golden Gate Rotary Club and donations from private individuals.

Naples Bay Rotary has donated \$750, which will buy 10 new wheelchairs. Golden Gate Rotary has contributed \$500, which will buy six wheelchairs.

Later this month, Rambacher will continue her charitable mission. She is scheduled to return to Guatemala to deliver more wheelchairs. She's on a one-year voluntary leave of absence from AmericanAirlines so that she can dedicate herself to offering humanitarian aid across remote parts of

the world.

With help from the community, Rambacher hopes to ship an entire container of wheelchairs to Guatemala to distribute among the hundreds of adults and children who are in dire need of assistance. One container holds 280 wheelchairs.

Rambacher's parents, Noreen and Henry Rambacher have accompanied her on a few of her journeys.

"The poverty just smacks you in the face because you're all around it," she said. "It's easier for me to go to Guatemala than it is to come back. When I come back (to America), I see so much wealth and the people don't know it."

Among those pitching in to assist with Rambacher's efforts is state Rep. Mike Davis, R-Naples, who recently handed Rambacher a check for \$150 to purchase two wheelchairs.

Davis met Rambacher when she recently visited with members of the Naples Bay Rotary Club, of which Davis is a member. After viewing some photographs from Rambacher's trips abroad, Davis said he was compelled by the stories and decided to help.

"She talked at length about how people were worthy of receiving a wheelchair," Davis said. "There are a number of them that without (Rambacher's) delivery of a wheelchair they would simply go through life without one. We live and sometimes forget that small things can be the very things that some folks are going to need."

Jim Gover, a retired Naples dentist and member of the Naples Bay Rotary, is also pitching in to help. For the past 30 years, Gover, who is affectionately known as "Dr. Jim," has shipped thousands of toothbrushes to the poor of Central America.

Gover said he stood behind Rambacher's wheelchair drive 100 percent. Gover referred to Rambacher as the "Mother Theresa of Naples."

"We can change someone's life for a small amount of money," said Gover, 71. "If you live in one of these villages and if you want to move around, you have to get a human being to carry you."

AT A GLANCE

To make donations to Airline Ambassadors International for new wheelchairs, call Penny Rambacher at (239) 348-0815, or e-mail her at AirlineAngel@hotmail.com. To visit the Airline Ambassadors Web site, log on to www.AirlineAmb.org. To learn more about Rambacher's humanitarian trips abroad, visit www.AirlineAngels.org. Individuals wishing to donate used wheelchairs that are in good condition, can bring the chairs to St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Store at 3196 Davis Blvd.

"A wheelchair gives you mobility; you can function; you have independence. You're not nailed to the ground," he added. "It gives a person dignity."

People who live in extreme poverty in Central and South America often suffer some sort of physical or mental handicap, a direct result of malnutrition and a lack of medical attention, Rambacher pointed out.



Penny Rambacher, center, shows pictures of children in Guatemala from one of her trips delivering toys and medical supplies to Rotary Club of Naples member Sam Hinkle, left, during a Rotary Club luncheon where Rambacher was a guest to drum up support to take wheelchairs to Guatemala on her next trip later this month. Dr. Jim Gover, second from left, a dentist a Rotary Club member, also works with Rambacher in efforts to teach citizens in Central America about proper dental care. [Lexey Swall/Staff](#)

Countries like Guatemala are extremely poor. There is no middle class and the social classes are divided into the haves and have-nots, said Rambacher, who has visited Guatemala many times.

"It's sad that their government doesn't have programs to help the people," she said. "The majority of the help comes from independent people, charities and other governments."

Hundreds of children in Guatemala and Ecuador are known as the "children of the garbage dump" because they live and work in large fields where trash such as aluminum cans from surrounding villages and provinces are dumped, Rambacher said.

The children often eat out of dump sites or scour for cans to recycle them in exchange for money to buy food.

Guatemala is a mountainous country in Central America, just south of Mexico. Its primary language is Spanish, though there are 28 other indigenous languages derived from the Mayan tongue. Ecuador is in South America, between Colombia and Peru. Spanish is the primary language of Ecuador.

Rambacher considers taking a year off from her regular job to help those who are less fortunate as her way of "giving back."

"I've had such a blessed life," Rambacher said. "My parents have taken

care of me. I've been able to go to college and have good jobs."

She plans to continue to help families in underdeveloped countries.

"It's addictive," Rambacher said. "It makes you feel so good that you want to do it again and again."

Navigation:

[Go to today's Naples section front](#)

[Go to our 7-day Naples archive](#)

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