



# COAN CONNECTION

## In Memorium

### Ralph C. Gertsch (1955-2006)



Ralph C. Gertsch MD, a great friend and tireless supporter of COAN, passed away on June 2, 2006 after an sudden heart attack. He was an anesthesiologist with Critical Health Systems in Raleigh, but also made many trips to Central and South America to improve healthcare in developing countries. Fluent in Spanish and adept at caring for and working with people, he was invaluable on COAN trips to the Rosales Hospital in León, Nicaragua.

After growing up in Utah, becoming an expert skier and attending cooking school, Ralph Gertsch took off on a two year Mormon mission to La Paz, Bolivia. In South America he honed his Spanish language skills and developed a passion for taking care of people. His life was changed. Following his return from Bolivia he elected to forego cooking as a career

and entered the medical profession. He then began working as an anesthesiologist at Rex Hospital. But Dr. Gertsch never lost his passion for the people of Latin America. After making many trips to Nicaragua he encouraged his practice partners to participate in COAN missions. As a result of his efforts a number of anesthesiologists and nurse anesthetists have journeyed to Leon on COAN missions.

Whether in English or Spanish, Dr. Gertsch always seemed to know what to say. The relationship between the departments of orthopaedics and anesthesia in León grew closer because of his presence. He promoted teamwork with a, "What can I do to help you?" attitude. His display of caring and compassion for those in need was an example to us all.

One particular trip to Nicaragua with Dr. Gertsch will stay etched in my memory because of an unexpected obstacle on the trip home. After arriving at the airport in Managua, we learned that the Raleigh-Durham airport was

closed because of an ice storm. Caught unaware of the weather conditions in Raleigh, we felt stranded. We were tired and just wanted to get home to our families. Luckily the Charlotte airport was open, and we arrived there safely, but late at night. After renting a 4 wheel drive vehicle, our team looked at one another wondering who would drive in the snow and sleet for 5 or 6 hours in the middle of the night. It was not a difficult decision. As many others had done, we too, put our trust in Ralph Gertsch to get us through a tough situation. It was a long night, which turned into morning, and the travel was slow. But in the end Ralph got us home.

COAN will honor Dr. Gertsch through our *Footprints* program. We will miss the presence of Dr. Ralph Gertsch, but his compassion and commitment to the poverty stricken people of Latin America will continue through COAN's work, for which he did so much to advance.

By Robert Caudle, MD

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#### Nicaraguan Nuggets



- The Córdoba is the currency of Nicaragua.
- Nicaragua has an agriculturally based economy with major exports of cotton, sugar, bananas, coffee, tobacco, beef, rum, sesame seed, corn, beans, and sorghum.
- Nicaragua is the home to over 5 million people
- Volcan Concepción is one of the highest and most active volcanoes, located on Lake Nicaragua.
- Nicaragua has 4 major newspapers and 5 TV channels with international coverage.
- 60% of the population is under 17 years old.

## COAN PLANS OCTOBER MISSION

As the trip leader, Robert Caudle, MD will head the team of seven to León, Nicaragua, October 21-28. The October 2006 trip participants are: Dr. Ed Campion, Robert Pontz, Christina Dees, Dr. Eric Meinberg of Wake Orthopaedics, Dr. Henry Vega and Steve Di Nardo, CRNA, both of Critical Health Systems. This trip will focus on assisting with surgeries, training sessions for the residents, as well as the review of inventory control and current business operations. Dr. Caudle, Dr. Campion and Christina will stay an additional 4 days to evaluate possible sites for future COAN *Footprints*. They will explore hospitals in Puerta Cabezas, Rio San Juan, and the capital city of Managua.

## **COAN *Footprints* Program Established in Honor of Ralph Gertsch, MD *Changing Healthcare of a Nation***

COAN has accomplished a great deal since inception in 2002. Health-

*“...in order to change healthcare of a nation, more “footprints” will be needed. It will require people, financing, and hard work.”*

COAN’s *Footprints* Program will bring much needed upgrades to healthcare across the nation of Nicaragua. Not mere marks in sand, COAN footprints represent locations designated to uplift the nation’s healthcare. In honor of the memory of Dr. Ralph Gertsch, COAN is branching out from its sole footprint in Leon, Nicaragua. Dr. Gertsch was dedicated in life to reaching out to help the poverty stricken people of Central and South America.

Since inception in 2002, COAN has made great strides working with Nicaraguan surgeons and administrators to improve healthcare in the Rosales Hospital in León. Upgrading inventory and equipment, establishing an orthopaedic library, assisting in surgery and patient evaluations, leading education, and bringing the innovative SIGN project to Leon are but a few of the accomplishments to date. Mission trips to Leon have increased from once a year in the late 90’s to three or four trips per year currently.

COAN’s second “footprint” will be in Chinandega, located less than an hour north of Leon. After visiting the hospital there several times, COAN will add regular visits to this facility which needs substantial support. The doctors in Chinandega serve a large, poor population and are severely lacking in equipment and orthopaedic implants.

We are excited to have recently opened a Raleigh office of COAN at 7501 Creedmoor Road. This “footprint” will facilitate communications, business operations, and fundraising here in the U.S. Previously COAN had been without a real home, utilizing a temporary office within the office of Wake Orthopaedics.

The need for COAN is great, and the organization needs to grow to meet this challenge. COAN now has requests from hospitals all over Nicaragua, located in regions far from León, to help in their efforts to deliver modern orthopaedics to the people of their region. As we move forward in the next several years, COAN will sponsor more physicians traveling to more sites within the country. In October hospitals in Managua, Río San Juan, and Puerto Cabeza will be evaluated for potential future trips.

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## **COAN WELCOMES NEW PROGRAMS MANAGER, CHRISTINA MATHENA DEES!**

COAN is proud to welcome our new Programs Manager to the team! Bilingual physicians and support staff are a critical element to COAN’s success.

Christina was born and raised in a small town in Illinois. Through her international travel, she developed an affinity for the Hispanic population. Christina brings to COAN not only fluency in Spanish, but also a love for the Spanish language and people.

She has had the opportunity to travel on several mission trips to Honduras, which focused on bringing medical clinics and supplies to rural areas. Christina also lived abroad for

five months last year in Los Reyes, Michoacan, Mexico, where she taught people. English as a Second Language.

Christina and her new husband, Stephen, recently developed a new company, Bilingual Concepts, LLC, which offers onsite Spanish and English classes, document translation and interpreting services. Bilingual Concepts is designed to increase bilingual communication between friends, neighbors, coworkers, customers, and associates.

Christina will travel to Nicaragua as part of the October 2006 trip team. Christina is looking forward to helping COAN grow its mission and making a



# MISSION REPORT: JANUARY 2006

On Saturday, January 21, the mission team safely arrived at the airport in Managua. The team was greeted by Dr. Flores and Dr. Hooker, who accompanied them to León. Clinics were held Sunday through Thursday. A shared total of 62 patients were evaluated and treated between the Hand, Pediatric, and General Surgery clinics. The team was able to assess which tools and equipment were needed in regards to the SIGN project. On Friday afternoon, a reception was held for the COAN members to thank them for their help. Overall, trip leader, Jeff Kobs, MD, called the mission a success and looks forward to the team's return next year!

*"This was the first time that I have seen distinct improvement in nearly all aspects of our mission: The residents now are infinitely more capable than the residents 3 years ago, the IM nailing is being done while we are not there in a reproducible manner, and the Nicaraguans (residents and attendings) are able to self-critique their performance. In addition, they are taking seriously the on-going commitment by initiating changes in the appointment of the implant resident, working with the inventory, teaching one another and problem solving on many fronts. Very gratifying. It's actually working."* -Ed Campion, MD



**COAN would like to thank the January Mission Team for their hard work and dedication:**

**(From Right to Left)**

- Jeff Kobs, MD, Team Leader
- Paul Reiker, MD
- George Edwards, MD
- Ed Campion, MD
- Jerri Lemanski, CRNA
- Alice Rowell, RN

\*Also included are our host doctors: Drs. Vargas and Flores

## COAN GETS NEW HOME IN NORTH RALEIGH

As of September 1st, COAN's U. S. base of operations moved to a new location in North Raleigh. The move will allow COAN to grow and develop while also providing plenty of space for meetings. Please be sure to update your records to reflect COAN's new contact information.

In addition to a new home and contact information, COAN is also having a new website created! The website is currently under development and is anticipated to be finished around November 1st.

### COAN Contact Information:

**COAN**  
**7501 Creedmoor Road, Suite 108**  
**Raleigh, NC 27613**  
**Phone/Fax: 919.845.4496**  
**coan@bellsouth.net**  
**www.coanhealth.com**

## BRACELET BUDDIES

COAN has launched the **Bracelet Buddies** Program to help grow our mission. We are selling blue silicone bracelets that read "Together We Can" or "Juntos Podemos Hacerlo". We are asking for a \$5 minimum donation. Bracelets are neatly packaged in bags of 20, along with a card explaining how donations support COAN and the people of Nicaragua.

COAN needs your help offering these bracelets. Please contact the COAN office and let us know how we can get a bag to you! Be sure to specify if you would like bracelets in English, Spanish, or a mixture of both.



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**COAN would like to thank the following for their 2006 contributions  
as well as the many anonymous donors!**

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