

Helping to heal

Guatemalan healer and teacher Lidia Escobedo volunteers her healing therapies at Hogar de Ancianos Fray Rodrigo de La Cruz, a nursing home in Antigua. She also teaches the next generation of healers in villages across Guatemala.

by CALLIE SCHMIDT

Lidia Escobedo, 58, tunes in to AC/DC the minute she rolls out of bed and belts out Ave Maria before she rolls back in at night.

Her callused hands glide across her patients' pressure points, releasing their pain and giving them extended mobility. Escobedo can apply pressure and practice her therapy for two to three hours at a time without a break. This strength, she claims, comes from practicing Mayan martial arts.

In her everyday life, Escobedo balances being a Mayan priestess, life coach, teacher, and healer of humans and animals. She also helps terminally ill people to die peacefully.

LIDIA ESCOBEDO CHECKS IN ON HER PATIENT MARGARITA PATZAN, 72, AT HOGAR DE ANCIANOS FRAY RODRIGO DE LA CRUZ ON JAN. 17. PATZAN EXPERIENCED INCREASED MOBILITY AFTER RECEIVING PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL THERAPY FROM ESCOBEDO. "IF YOU TALK TO A PERSON WITH LOVE IN YOUR HEART, IT WILL ALWAYS WORK," ESCOBEDO SAID. "ALWAYS."

PHOTO BY TIM HECK



ANTIGUA RESIDENTS SIT OUTSIDE OF HOGAR DE ANCIANOS FRAY RODRIGO DE LA CRUZ IN THE LITTLE SHADE PROVIDED BY THE ROOF ON JAN. 17. THIS NURSING HOME WAS FOUNDED BY DR. FIRSTNAME LASTNAME

Escobedo asserts that her therapy comes as a gift. Although Escobedo received no formal education in physical therapy, she studies human anatomy and received help from her mother, who descended from Poco Mam, a Mayan tribe. "I study the body," Escobedo said. "The human body is just amazing."

Escobedo volunteers once a week at Hogar de Ancianos Fray Rodrigo de La Cruz, a nursing home in Antigua, Guatemala, with 170 residents and six doctors. There, with the approval of the she helps heal residents through different forms of therapy such as physical, occupational, spiritual, music and dance.

Escobedo's patient and nursing home resident Saturnina Arriaga struggled to determine her own age, but guessed about 60 years old. After checking with the staff, however, Escobedo found Arriaga to be 90 years old. "We age as human beings faster here," Escobedo said.

Escobedo and her team teach residents how to express their feelings, especially when receiving therapy. "People from little villages are tough. Mayans don't express pain, happiness, or if they are mad," Escobedo said. "They are stoic."

Graciela Salazar, 79, struggles to walk, bore no children and never married. "I'm single and available," Salazar said, producing chuckles from Escobedo.

Salazar moved to Guatemala City, the same city Escobedo was born in, after being kicked out of her house by her uncles at age 25. She transitioned from growing up raising cattle on a farm to working as a maid for more than 54 years. Salazar cleaned houses until arriving at Hogar De Ancianos five years ago.

Escobedo began her therapy and healing journey in 2001. Her favorite kind of therapy, however, is spiritual. "It has to be how you connect with people, with the person that is in front of you," Escobedo said. "For us this is sacred..."

PHOTO BY CALLIE SCHMIDT



A RESIDENT RELAXES ON HER BED AT HOGAR DE ANCIANOS ON JAN. 17. HOGAR DE ANCIANOS IS A NURSING HOME IN ANTIGUA, GUATEMALA, HOSTING 170 RESIDENTS BUT ONLY SIX DOCTORS. "WE ARE SEVERELY UNDERSTAFFED," ESCOBEDO SAID.



ESCOBEDO CHECKS IN ON HER PATIENT SATURNINA ARRIAGA AT HOGAR DE ANCIANOS ON JAN. 17. ARRIAGA GUESSED SHE WAS 60 YEARS OLD, BUT AFTER CHECKING WITH THE STAFF ESCOBEDO FOUND ARRIAGA TO BE 90 YEARS OLD. "WE AGE AS HUMAN BEINGS FASTER HERE," ESCOBEDO SAID.

PHOTO BY CALLIE SCHMIDT



SATURNINA ARRIAGA LAYS STILL ON THE THERAPY BED, ON JAN. 17. WHILE LIDIA ESCOBEDO PERFORMS HER THERAPY, HER HANDS HAVE BEEN CALLOUSED FROM THE YEARS OF HARD WORK

PHOTO BY CARLO HOLMBERG

If you connect with people [through] true love, compassion, and acceptance, then you can connect with their soul, and you can help them to find their own way of healing."

In 2005, Escobedo stumbled upon a newspaper ad for volunteers at Unidad De Oncologia Pediatrica, a national hospital for children with cancer in Guatemala City. "I received a call to become a Mayan priestess, and then I received a call to work with people with cancer," Escobedo said.

Before calling UNOP, Escobedo called four different hospitals to offer her services, but was rejected by them all.

She decided to try one more time when she saw the newspaper ad for UNOP. There were 15 names listed in the newspaper ad, so Escobedo pointed at each one saying, de tin marin, de dos pingüe, the Latin version of eeny, meeny, miny, moe. "And I say, always, 'Guide me please.' Because I do believe in God," Escobedo said. "I do believe in a loving and big, big God."



DR. GUSTAVO PALENCIA EXPLAINS HIS SKEPTICISM WHEN HIRING LIDIA ESCOBEDO AT HOGAR DE ANCIANOS FRAY RODRIGO DE LA CRUZ ON JAN. 17. PALENCIA IS ONE OF THE SIX DOCTORS THAT ATTEND TO RESIDENTS AT HOGAR DE ANCIANOS FRAY RODRIGO DE LA CRUZ.

Escobedo ended up calling the founder of the hospital, Berta De Canelia. Her son's cancer inspired Canelia to start the hospital. The founder brought her son to the states, where he received therapy from healers like Lidia. "She said, 'Lidia, I have been praying for four years to God to bring somebody like you,'" Escobedo said.

Doctors were skeptical of Escobedo's practices at first, but after seeing the results patients were experiencing after receiving therapy from Escobedo, doctors started paying attention and giving her intensive care patients to work with.

Doctor Gustavo Palencia, sub-director of the nursing home, interviewed Escobedo over the phone when she applied to become a volunteer. Palencia was skeptical of Escobedo's model of therapy at first, since the nursing home only practices the physical therapy model. "Yes, I doubted because I had never had someone like Lidia here before," Palencia said. "But I felt confidence in Lidia when I met her. I thought it would be good for the patients. I liked that she was very secure about telling me what she does. I liked her honesty."

Head nurse Mayda Elizabeth Barrios Orozco started working at the nursing home more than 30 years ago. She has known and worked with Escobedo for six months, yet

never doubted or criticized her methods. "I didn't doubt her practices," Barrios said. "I trusted Doctor Palencia because he said yes to Lidia."

Nursing home resident Margarita Patzan, 72, received therapy from Escobedo after experiencing stiffness in her body, especially in her arms. Escobedo checked in on Patzan Jan. 15 to find her able to move her arms with greater mobility.

Although Escobedo enjoys utilizing her healing skills to help people, she also volunteers her time to teach the next generation of healers.

She begins teaching healing practices to students as young as nine years old. "I teach them you don't need to be waiting for somebody to help you," Escobedo said. "A lot of NGOs have come and given money, but they haven't taught them how to use the money."

"I teach them you don't need to be waiting for somebody to help you."

- Lidia Escobedo, healer



HOGAR DE ANCIANOS RESIDENT GRACIELA SALAZAR, 79, WAITS IN LINE TO RECEIVE THERAPY FROM ESCOBEDO ON JAN. 10. SALAZAR STRUGGLES TO WALK, NEVER MARRIED AND BORE NO CHILDREN. "I'M SINGLE AND AVAILABLE," SALAZAR SAID.



PHOTO BY TIM HECK

LIDIA ESCOBEDO HOLDS THE HAND OF SATURNINA ARRIAGA, A RESIDENT AT HOGAR DE ANCIANOS FRAY RODRIGO DE LA CRUZ, TO FEEL HER SQUEEZING STRENGTH ON JAN. 10. ARRIAGA HAD A STROKE PRIOR TO ESCOBEDO'S THERAPY.

LIDIA ESCOBEDO INTERACTS WITH HOGAR DE ANCIANOS HEAD NURSE MAYDA ELIZABETH BARRIOS OROZCO ON JAN. 17. ESCOBEDO WORKS CLOSELY WITH DOCTORS AND NURSES TO ENSURE HER PATIENTS RECEIVE WELL-ROUNDED CARE. "I DIDN'T DOUBT LIDIA'S PRACTICES," BARRIOS SAID. "I TRUST THE DOCTOR BECAUSE HE SAID YES TO LIDIA."



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LINDA SAYS:

"If you talk to a person with love in your heart, it will always work. Always."

"I am not one who goes to church every Sunday. Because God is everywhere."

"I did everything by myself. But I had a great example, my mother."

"Look for the truth in everything, so you don't take sides. Because when you take sides, you make the world divided, when the world is so big."

"I know what it means to be helped and to be given an opportunity."

"I am so proud of my country. We have so much to give to the world."

"Human beings are a big collage of textures."





How to become a Mayan priest/priestess:

- It begins one of two ways: either the moment you are born or when you receive the spiritual call.
- Something weird will happen spiritually where you will feel the necessity to help people.
- Usually, in the communities, children will be present at a sacred Mayan fire ceremony. It is usually there where people will feel called.

Escobedo travels to villages across Guatemala to teach young people her healing practices. She travels mainly by chicken busses, occasionally catching a shuttle or truck along the way.

Training for student healers requires hard training - working and practices from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. for a week. Escobedo does not allow her students to use drugs, because they are harmful to the body. "I do believe that true love is action," Escobedo said. "Actions for others, but first for yourself."

In the future, Escobedo sees herself continuing to teach. "I'm getting old, so I want to share the knowledge I have," Escobedo said.

She hopes to bring people from around the world to learn Mayan wisdom and knowledge to connect the two worlds. "I am so proud of my country," Escobedo said. "We have so much to give to the world."