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## **Plastic Surgery: Deep in south Mexico, the lives of children get repaired**

**By DR. ALAN MUSKETT**  
**Plastic Surgery**

Some guys call you up and invite you to go on seedy sports junkets, insalubrious fishing expeditions or the putative "golf" outing. My friend Walt Peet calls with schemes involving an extended week of surgery in southern Mexico. "Like a candy store, man, all the cleft lips and palates you can do."

This trip, to Tuxtla, Gutierrez, in the Mexican state of Chiapas, was put together by Smile Network, a smaller, tight organization out of Minneapolis that works closely with local medical officials in areas that need help with meeting demand for repairing cleft lip and palate malformations.

I collected another deadbeat Billings husband and father, anesthesiologist Chuck Aragon, and 12 hours later and multiple body cavity searches later (one of us looks like a terrorist from central casting, see picture above for clue) we made it to Tuxtla.

The day before surgery we toured a small town high in the mountains called San Juan Chamula. Naturally, since we were way south in Mexico, it was snowing, and from a street-side vendor I bought a coat that looked like a recently eviscerated sheep that had not recently bathed. Our mission pediatrician, gourmand and tour guide, Assidro, took us to San Sebastian, a centuries-old church, where the residents practice a numinous fusion of Catholicism and traditional Mayan beliefs.

The interior of the cavernous cathedral was illuminated by thousands of votive candles, clusters of them burning in front of effigies of saints, all of them European white guys. One wizened woman kneeling on the floor was holding a live chicken, passing it gently over the flickering candles, as if in a sanctifying ritual.

We watched mesmerized, our interest intensifying when she snapped the chicken's neck. The thin gray smoke from the candles wafted to the capacious ceiling, as if in communion with the offerings from centuries earlier.

As in prior missions we saw cute babies with wide clefts, and then (perhaps vainly) basked in the approbation of the grateful parents when they saw their child repaired, their child now as they had expected, for no parent expects a baby's face to be rent asunder.

In some Mexican dialects the term for cleft deformities translates as "cursed."

But this trip I was struck by the teenagers we saw, the awkward adolescents whose lives had been dominated by the stigma of a lip in a perpetual sneer, or a twisted and misshapen nose. Their downcast countenance, their every body syllable designed to minimize the observer's view of the deformity, each signal they emitted spoke of a crushingly low self-esteem. I was (and arguably, still essentially am) a skinny, pimply, geeky teenager, and no amount of cover-up, hair gel or barbells could mitigate the disaster that was me. But, oh my, I can't begin to get a grip on what these kids have lived with.

Edgar is 17 and just seemed whipped by the way he looked. After surgery, his father, bursting with pride, said "finally Edgar is worthy to carry on our family name." We didn't know whether to be pleased or completely creeped out.

Cleft surgery is a jambalaya of chess, a Rubik's cube and a thousand-piece puzzle. Look at your own lip in the mirror. Your nostrils are separated by the columella down the middle. The groove from the base of the columella down to the lip is called the philtral column, and then that blends into your upper lip, which has the little Cupid's bow in the middle and the delicate white roll along the edge

of the lip. The red part of the lip is the vermillion, which gives fullness to the lip.

In the space of a half-inch in a cleft lip baby, every one of these lines and bumps and dips and doodles is screwed up, even the muscles and skin inside the lip. Imagine a symphonic orchestra, with 100 instruments. For the sound to be beautiful, each instrument is delicately and precisely balanced against each other, and each has to be consonant with the other. We may not know anything about music, but we know when it is right. A lip is similar: You may know nothing of anatomy, but you know if a lip is right.

I think our team had a symphonic resonance as well. Thousands of miles away from home, I felt the easy comfort of an operating room staffed by experienced pros, recovery and ward nurses who just handled stuff, and records and support staff who pushed the ball up the floor.

We had two surgical crews in adjacent rooms, and I am quite convinced that Walt and Chuck's music came from Wifebeater

tunes.com. There was a subliminal undercurrent of competition over who had the largest admiring posse in the OR at a given time. Our accommodations were simple, the usual straw mat on the dirt floor of a thatched hut. OK, that's a lie. But the room service was slow.

Standing in San Sebastian, the faintly foreboding images of the Saints ephemeral in the candlelight, I wondered if we were just a contemporary manifestation of a Eurocentric theological/medical road trip. But in the rafters, in that vast space above the altar, I saw not cardinals in robes but the spirits of hard-working monks and priests who were ignorant of geopolitics. They lived and died in poverty and obscurity in a remote village so that people there would know that God loves them.

I let the political considerations, like the smoke from the candles, rise and dissipate. I hope that a teenager with a bad lip and nose, or the family of a baby with a hole in its face, knows that someone loves them.

*Dr. Alan Muskett is a board-certified plastic surgeon at Billings Plastic Surgery. More information is available at [www.billingsplasticsurgery.com](http://www.billingsplasticsurgery.com).*

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