

EDITOR'S NOTE: The MTA's Robin Blair has been volunteering in poverty-stricken areas for the past 30 years, most recently in El Salvador, following the January earthquake. The conclusion of this two-part series describes his earlier hurricane-relief work in Nicaragua.

MTA's Robin Blair Helps 'Make a Difference' to the People of El Salvador, Nicaragua

• Part 2 of 2



Robin Blair, left, helps unload medical supplies in Nicaragua.



Relief workers use tarps to build temporary shelters.



Contributions from MTA employees helped purchase cows for food cooperative.

By BILL HEARD, Editor
(Feb. 27) "I want to make a difference in the world we live in," says Robin Blair. "To put back more than we take out."

The natural disasters that have wreaked havoc in Central America in recent years gave the MTA transportation planning manager an opportunity to do just that.

After Hurricane Mitch left its trail of destruction across Nicaragua in November, 1998, Blair traveled to Nicaragua to help assess conditions and determine the needs of homeless and jobless residents in an area near the capital city of Managua.

The work resulted in shipments of food, tools, medicines and materials needed to rebuild the hurricane-destroyed areas.

Bought four cows

"We needed to make sure people were being fed, to see that they got medical services and housing," says Blair. "With the help of some of the people here at the MTA, we even bought four cows and set up a cooperative in an area where people were suffering from malnutrition."

In Nicaragua, he and others also helped local residents form farming cooperatives and obtain no-interest loans. They helped install water systems and start small businesses.

They worked with other volunteers who provided medical services.

After a couple of weeks, Blair was back home, but he had big plans. He managed to obtain a 40-foot shipping container, and he persuaded the people at a church-affiliated school in Covina where he is a board member to help fill it.

By June, 1999, the container was crammed with building supplies, tools,

clothing, medicines, canned goods and packaged foods. The group even wangled 25 bicycles and a couple of trucks. Again, Blair set out for Nicaragua.

Officials cast a baleful eye

On the docks of Managua, officials cast a baleful eye at the container. Although the supplies were desperately needed, they were cautious.

Did the group plan to sell the goods? That might hurt local merchants whose businesses were just beginning to recover from the hurricane. Give them away? Again, merchants might be hurt, and there was the black market to be concerned about.

Give-aways also might cause riots among the poor. "We had to keep rotating the locations of our distribution points because people recognized the container," he remembers.

Eventually, however, all the goods were distributed and Blair and the container returned home. And again, he began to fill the container with contributions, many of which would come from MTA employees. They were distributed in Nicaragua in December, 1999.

HOW YOU CAN HELP: Since his return from El Salvador in January, Blair has been working to fill another 40-foot shipping container with building materials, tools and other supplies. Shipment is scheduled in March. Employees who would like to contribute canned or packaged foods, clothing, tools, building supplies and other goods for El Salvador relief may contact Robin Blair at 922-3074.

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