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Br. Mickey McGrath shares sketches and stories from trips to Guatemala and Kenya, where he

Br. Mickey McGrath shares sketches and stories from trips to Guatemala and Kenya, where he met people who have benefited from the programs and ministries of Catholic Relief Services. Francesca, drawn here in her home in Kenya, prays Psalm 121 every morning. (Mickey McGrath)



by Mickey McGrath

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In 2017 I was invited on a sketching tour of Guatemala with a small group of Americans to observe some of the educational services operated by Catholic Relief Services, or CRS. In August of the following year, accompanied by CRS workers, I visited the city of Kisumu and its environs in western Kenya. Later, when I was commissioned by Catholic Relief Services to illustrate the seven principles of Catholic social teaching for their video series "[CST 101](#)," I had valuable firsthand experience to draw from.

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So imagine my deep dismay upon learning that Catholic Relief Services has been adversely affected by the current presidential administration's dismantling of the USAID program. The already present knot in my stomach grows tighter as I recall the beautiful people of all ages and cultures whom I met and sketched right in their own homes, schools and places of employment; people who were given educational, social and professional opportunities they never would have had were it not for the assistance of Catholic Relief Services.

Through their heartfelt sharing of how their own lives had been changed, they changed my own - and proved true what St. Francis de Sales once said: "Eyes speak to eyes, and heart to heart."

Prior to my trip to Guatemala I had never been to Central America, so I was excited to accept the invitation. It was only for one week, but what a week it was, packed with enough sights and sensations to enhance forever my experience of the human family.

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We visited programs created for young adults to learn cooking, barbering and coffee farming skills that turned into careers, along with training in restaurant and hotel management. We heard the testimonies of the students, some of whom came from distant and remote villages, grateful for the knowledge and experience they gained, but even more for the lifelong friendships they formed at the Barbara Ford Peacebuilding Center established by the Sisters of Charity of New York.

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(Mickey McGrath)

In Guatemala City I witnessed and sketched migrant families who received food, shelter, legal assistance and job counseling at the Scalabrini welcome center. The Congregation of the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo, or Scalabrinians, was founded in 1887 in Italy but has grown into an international community that serves people in more than 30 countries.

The sketch seen here depicts a young dad watching his little girl playing on the sliding board, a passing moment of freedom in the midst of tragic confinement and uncertainty about their future: a father's love amid fear and turmoil. Just like our God.

We visited schools for children whose only meal on any given day was the lunch prepared by their mothers in the small kitchen in the school. I sketched in the third-grade classroom while the teacher read a story of a female car mechanic whose dream was to one day open her own shop, something they'd never imagined possible. By the end of the week in Guatemala, I had filled one-and-a-half sketchbooks with my pen and ink observations.

In Kisumu, on the banks of Lake Victoria in Kenya, our Catholic Relief Services guide led us on an unforgettable tour from remote villages with bumpy dirt roads to the heavily trafficked city where cows walked the paved streets alongside crowded buses. I met and sketched people of all ages, from little children to grandparents, who have benefitted in life-changing ways from the programs and ministries of Catholic Relief Services.

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I recall sitting in the living room of the corrugated tin home of Francesca, who had a photo of Pope Francis hanging on her wall. We communicated through gestures our mutual love for him and I began to sketch while she shared with us her heartbreaks and hopes. Like many grandparents in Kenya, she was raising her grandchildren on her own while living with serious health issues.

Her only source of income was a french fry stand on the side of the road, which had been destroyed by political insurrectionists a few months before. Catholic Relief Services was helping her rebuild. She cooked a batch of fries to show her gratitude to us, which we ate right on the shoulder of the busy highway, with trucks and motorcycles whizzing by. They were the best fries I'd ever tasted, a sacred meal indeed.

Francesca recited in Swahili Psalm 121, which she prays every morning: "I lift my eyes to the mountains from whence comes my help." To this day I cannot pray that psalm without thinking of dear and gentle Francesca in her humble home. When we commented on the obvious friendship that she had developed with her social worker seated next to her on the couch, they hugged each other tightly without saying a word. I felt that I was witnessing the Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth right before my eyes.

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Our last encounter in Kenya was with a young woman named Hellen, who, after receiving technical training in a program sponsored by Catholic Relief Services, was an auto mechanic. Hellen was charming and smart, and readily agreed to a sketching op by putting on her uniform and getting to work underneath a raised car.

Through the work of Catholic Relief Services, the world has become a better, kinder place for many. Now, their dreams will become much more difficult to achieve without the support of USAID.

I think of the words of Dorothy Day: "We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its ever widening circle will reach around the world." May we all keep throwing our pebbles in a spirit of hope and solidarity.

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