

BROWNSVILLE The Herald

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BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY 1892

FRONTERA DE SALUD

GRASS ROOTS MEDICINE

Students, patients learn from UTMB volunteer effort

BY LAURA B. MARTINEZ
THE BROWNSVILLE HERALD

One weekend a month about a dozen students from the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston hop on a bus and make the seven-hour trip to Brownsville.

They sleep during the nearly 400-mile journey for what they know will be a busy weekend as they provide medical care for an underserved area.

The group visits the Brownsville Community Health Center on East 22nd Street where they perform medical exams on the center's patients.

They conduct cervix and breast examinations on patients who have been on waiting lists for months.

Brownsville resident Yolanda C. Ruiz, 57, had no problem with the health care students conducting her exams on Sept. 25. Had she not received care on that date, she would have had to wait until January 2005, when an opening at the center was available.

"They need to learn, too," Ruiz said. "They ask me questions about my health, my headaches and any other discomforts I have. They were very concerned."

The health care students are participating in the Frontera de Salud, a volunteer program at the UTMB-Galveston. The program allows its students to experience the needs of the medically underserved first-hand.

As she finishes examining Ruiz, second-year medical student Tammy Howard reminds the Brownsville woman to have her doctor exam her legs.

Ruiz had undergone knee replacement surgery and was starting to experience some swelling and pain.

"It seemed like they are more concerned," Ruiz said minutes after her evaluation. "The doctors, sometimes they walk in and it's one, two, three and they are out. They (the students) take more time."

This is the sixth year students from UTMB-Galveston visit



PHOTOS BY LIZA LONGORIA/THE BROWNSVILLE HERALD

Amulio Mata has his blood pressure checked Sept. 26 in Cameron Park by a student volunteer from the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston. The students come to

Brownsville both for experience in meeting the needs of a medically underserved population and to provide needed medical services.

Medical student right at home in Cameron Park

BY LAURA B. MARTINEZ
THE BROWNSVILLE HERALD

Just about every day Ryan Gregory wakes up to the sound of hands patting *masa* for corn tortillas.

It's not unusual at the crack of dawn for him to hear a rooster's loud crow coming from a neighbor's yard.

"It is so much more tranquil than what I usually wake up with — a buzzer alarm or clock radio," Gregory said.

By the time he's finished taking his morning shower, breakfast is waiting for him on the table.

It can be a *gordita* filled with meat and beans, *papas con huevo* or *chorizo con huevo*, breakfasts that are a typical in a Mexican household.

For the past six weeks Gregory, a fourth-year medical student at the University of Texas Medical Branch at



Galveston, has made Juan and Epifania Banda's house on Jeffrey Street his home in Cameron Park. The Bandas agreed to take in the 30-year-old medical student for two months while he works at local clinics and churches.

Ryan Gregory helps Epifania Banda in the kitchen after dinner Thursday night. Gregory, a medical student at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, is staying with Banda's family while in Brownsville.

"I joke with them that the only thing that I am worried about is how much weight I'm gaining because they are feeding me so well," Gregory said, and complimented his hostess. "She

RIO GRANDE VALLEY

HOME

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cooks awesome."

During the day, Gregory works at the Brownsville Community Health Center in Cameron Park. On weekends, he helps out at the BCHC on East 22nd Street and with health fairs at Casa Digna at San Felipe de Jesus Catholic Church in Cameron Park — an undeveloped community with more than 6,000 residents. It's a place where lots are cheap and the average annual household income is a little more than \$4,000.

Gregory, an Arlington native, is a 1998 graduate of the University of Texas at Austin.

His father is an airline pilot and his mother is practicing acupuncture. Gregory said life with his own family is pretty much like the one he has with the Bandas. When he lived at home, the family would gather at the dinner table for a meal. At a recent health fair at Cameron Park, Gregory examined

54-year-old Enedina Zamarrapa, who was suffering from a severe thyroid problem.

He explained to her in Spanish what was causing the problem and the type of treatment she should receive.

Zamarrapa said she was glad that medical students such as Gregory were providing her with medical care.

The Bandas opened their home to Gregory after a call went out at the San Felipe church for a family to host a medical student that would move to the area temporarily and need a place to stay.

Recognizing the need for medical care in their community, the Bandas saw their opportunity to help.

"For us it is something very good," Juan Banda said. "We've never had someone live here who is not family. We thought it would be something interesting



PHOTOS BY LIZA LONGORIA/THE BROWNSVILLE HERALD

Above: Dr. Kirk L. Smith, director of the Frontera de Salud program at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, discusses the program's objectives in coming to Brownsville to provide serv-

and good to do."

Epifania Banda calls her tenant "el doctor."

"We are very happy to have him here because he talks to us about his food, living habits and English," Epifania said. "We help him with his Spanish and he helps us with English."

"I was just worried because I wasn't sure he would like the food I cook because I cook Mexican food," she said with a laugh.

The Bandas consider Gregory part of the family and refer to him as "el nuevo hijo grande," or "the new eldest son."

Epifania makes him breakfast in the morning and has dinner waiting for him when he comes home.

Gregory's favorites are Mexican enchiladas with white cheese and gorditas. At dinnertime, the Bandas and Gregory sit around the dinner table.

The conversation is in

Spanish. Topics range from what's happening in the news to health care.

Gregory even learned about the recent prison release of Mexican pop star Gloria Trevi. He had no idea who she was.

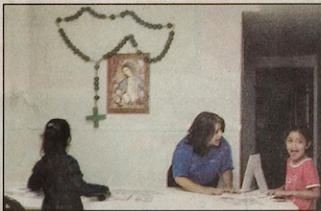
They talk about Gregory's views on Cameron Park and the lack of medical care for residents there. They discuss the history of the colonia and how it has grown during the past two years.

"It's a lot more social than what I am used to, which is nice," said Gregory who lives alone in a one-bedroom apartment in Galveston.

"It's nice when you get up in the morning to see some people there you know and say, 'How's it going?' and, 'What are you doing today?'"

This is the first year that UTMB-Galveston is offering the chance for medical students to live and work in a community as part of an

ices at the Brownsville Community Health Center. **Below:** Vera Marthner hands out diabetes literature Sept. 26 to patients getting free screenings at Casa Digna in Cameron Park.



elective course.

Dr. Kirk L. Smith, director of Frontera de Salud, or Healthy Border, and who heads up the course, said medical students need to live in underserved communities such as Cameron Park to see what works in terms of giving medical advice.

"If I tell people they need to do an exercise program, but if they don't have side-

walks ... you need to actually know how to translate your medical, nursing or allied health knowledge into what people can use (in) their homes and communities," Smith said.

Gregory will return to Galveston in about two weeks. He wants to practice internal medicine.

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UTMB

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Brownsville. Part of the program requires that they visit an underserved area once a month to help provide medical care for those in the area.

Providing health care for the underserved people of Brownsville is virtually an eye opener for many of the students, said Dr. Kirk L. Smith, director of the Frontera de Salud program at the UTMB-Galveston.

During his first trip to Brownsville, Smith said he was amazed by who was showing up at BCHC for medical care.

"It's not illegal aliens, it's not the very, very poor. It's the working people," Smith said.

The students learn that many of those showing up to BCHC are the working class who cannot afford medical insurance. Yet, they earn too much money to qualify for Medicaid or Medicare.

Rachel C. Locker, 29, is a first-year physician assistant at UTMB-Galveston. This is the first time she has helped at BCHC.

Locker read about the all-volunteer program on a flier posted at the university and wanted to have hands-on experience early in her medical career.

Locker said she wasn't too worried about the language barrier. There was always a bilingual student or physician nearby to help with the Spanish and English translation.

"I hope to gain confidence" by helping here, Locker said.

Fourth-year medical student Ryan Gregory helps lead a team of students. He guides them through the exams, telling them what to look for. He also evaluates their performance. Gregory had visited the health center during his second-year stint as a medical student.

At a Sept. 26 health fair at Casa Digna in Cameron Park, Gregory met a woman with a severe thyroid problem. Enedina Zamarrapa's thyroid gland had been growing for the past two years. She had received no medical care.

After examining Zamarrapa, Gregory contacted Dr. Smith, who evaluated the 54-year-old woman.

Smith said Zamarrapa is the perfect example of why the health care profession students are needed in the area.

"When it (the thyroid) gets big it closes off the wind pipe, and she will have trouble at night sleeping ... This is life threatening."

"If she hadn't come in here, what would have happened?"

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