

Refurbished Ambulances Will Save Lives

By [Susan Stiger](#) Sunday, March 9, 2008
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SPARE CHANGE: Let's say you live at 6,000 feet in Uspantan, Guatemala, an area of Mayan descendants that looks like the high forests of Los Alamos. What roads exist aren't paved. You're too poor to have a horse.

You are dehydrated, suffering gastro-intestinal distress— symptoms of E. coli infection from the water you drink. You need medical help at one of the two new rural health clinics about an hour and a half away. Your brother straps you into a chair, belts it onto his back and begins to carry you down the mountain.

"This happens several times a day," says Deborah Simon, a member of the Española Rotary Club, who grew up elsewhere in Guatemala and has been to Uspantan. "I've seen people brought into the hospital in wheelbarrows, carried across rivers on make-shift litters."

This is the kind of picture that's inspiring New Mexico Rotarians Greg Chalmers, Robert Boverie and Simon to roll out of Don Chalmers Ford early in the morning March 22 in two old, but refurbished, ambulances. In nine days, they hope to cover 2,640 miles and two border crossings to Uspantan.

The three return April 13. The ambulances stay, to be parked at the ends of what roads exist near Uspantan's outlying villages— 184 of them— where somebody with an infection or a respiratory condition can get a ride, maybe a lifesaving ride, to a clinic.

On the way to Uspantan, though, the rescue rigs will be off duty— just another couple of vehicles on the road. Boverie is having trouble grasping that.

"In an emergency, I'll hit the siren," he says. He's kidding, but the Coldwell Banker Legacy Realtor admits he'd just love to make a little noise.

Rotary International is one of the world's best known service organizations, working in the areas of health, children at risk, literacy, poverty and hunger, among others. Simon is team leader for the project. Boverie, a member of the Albuquerque Downtown Rotary Club, is grant chairman for Rotary District 5520, which includes all clubs in New Mexico and extreme West Texas. Chalmers, fleet manager at Don Chalmers Ford, is president of the Albuquerque Del Norte Rotary Club.

Don Chalmers Ford mechanically refurbished both ambulances and painted them as well— a donation worth \$7,200.

One is a 1979 Chevrolet from Phelps Dodge in Silver City with 13,500 miles on it.

"It did need refurbishing," says Chalmers, "The second is from the town of Bernalillo. It has 196,000 miles on it, but it's a Ford so we weren't worried about it."

The area of Uspantan built the two medical clinics; this year's Rotary project was to furnish them with everything from the ambulances to baby scales to sterilization equipment to trash cans— to the tune of \$74,999 from 18 local clubs, several in Guatemala City and Rotary International.

When the trio arrives in Mexico, Chalmers and Boverie will drop off Simon at the airport in Monterrey. The two drivers will rely on Mexican and Guatemalan Rotarians should they need help along the way. More Rotarians from New Mexico, including Simon, will fly into Guatemala City to travel to Uspantan for the delivery of the ambulances and to celebrate the completion of their last project there.

That one involved schools. It started with United by Friendship, a nonprofit offshoot of Rotary, building two schools of the 25 the community needed. Rotary provided desks, chairs and more.

"That project will wrap up while we're down there," says Simon. "There isn't much left to be done. They just want to have a party with us."

Turn on the sirens.