

Sometimes the rewards of volunteering are not seen - but they're still there

Article & photos by Becky Jones, South Texas Border Chapter

Working with South Texas Border Chapter (STBC) Texas Master Naturalist (TMN) members on our chapter project at the Vannie Cook Children's Cancer Center in McAllen has been a rewarding experience for me over the many years since we first began the project. I've expressed in presentations how it brought chapter members together for a common goal - the renewal and beautification of the atriums for the children who receive cancer treatment. Since our volunteer hours usually occur when the center is closed, chapter members rarely have in-person interaction with the children or staff members we serve.

A field trip to the center scheduled during the TMN Annual Meeting in McAllen led chapter members to volunteer for a "Spruce Up" Saturday at the end of September. Although the center is responsible for ongoing maintenance, the chapter renews the plantings after freezes and droughts, as well as for special occasions like its dedication and the Annual Meeting field trip.

During that volunteer day, it was wonderful for members who originally cleaned and planted the gardens in past years to see the results of their efforts. Likewise it was also enjoyable to introduce other members to this ongoing project. Many of the pollinator native and nonnative plants had grown and flourished. The *esperanza* in Atrium 2 towered over us at a height I've never seen anywhere!

However, the highlight of the day for me was visiting with Dr. Rodrigo Erana, a physician at the clinic, who was spending Saturday, his day off, to catch up with his work. He saw us working in the garden outside his office and came out to visit with us. He described to the chapter members how the atriums have such a positive impact on the patients and staff. His office windows face Atrium 3, with a large kidneywood and several pollinator flowering plants. Dr. Erana repeatedly expressed his appreciation to us for spending time on a Saturday to beautify the clinic.

The day before, I had attended a "Celebration of Heroes" at the civic center to celebrate the brave young patients who had successfully conquered cancer. Dr. Erana had been unable to attend because he had been called back to the clinic to treat a young patient. In his absence, he was warmly lauded for the kind and vital attention he gives the young patients. His cheerful demeanor as he thanked our chapter members didn't suggest the critical work he does every day, but I realized how our volunteer efforts had impacted his long hours at the clinic.



Dr. Erana of Vannie Cook Children's Cancer Center shares his appreciation

One Friday afternoon while I volunteered at the center, I was able to witness the outdoor celebration by family and friends as a young patient successfully completed her treatment. The joy that filled the air was almost palpable. It underlined the stress of going through treatment and brought home to me how the little beauties of nature, like the hummingbirds frequenting our feeders outside the infusion room, brighten the days for these children.

Our Master Naturalist volunteer work with plants, animals, children, and the public at large, is so rewarding. We often get to see the excitement of children when they learn about the wonders of



nature. We love to view and feed animal species in their native habitat. We volunteer in parks and refuges because of our love for nature. Sometimes the rewards of our efforts aren't evident until years later when our plantings bloom and grow, or when the children we instruct become parents or teachers themselves.

STBC members with Dr. Erana in one of the atrium gardens

From my own experience, I have found that this chapter project at the Vannie Cook Children's Cancer Center continues to provide an invaluable and treasured effect on patients and staff that we as volunteers can't experience first-hand. But it's there. And it's real. And it's appreciated more than we know.