

By: Sharon Kant-Rauch, *Democrat* Faith editor

## Mission work in Guatemala is fulfilling, unpredictable

Lloyd and Melanie Monroe build relationships, make music



The Guatemalan city of Panajachel, population 15,000, has attracted a large number of expatriate North Americans — some of whom suffer from drug and alcohol addictions. The city is also home to indigenous Mayans, many of them dirt poor, who speak more than 20 different languages.

In 2005, Lloyd Monroe quit his job with a Tallahassee law firm and moved there to minister to both groups. His wife Melanie and two teenage sons went with him. The Tallahassee Democrat published a story about them before they left.

Today, six years later, the Monroes' unique ministry is thriving. The couple is currently stateside, staying in their hometown of Waukeelah and speaking at local churches about their work. In 2010, 16 mission teams, most of them from Tallahassee, built 10 houses, held medical clinics and staffed vacation Bible schools for the Mayans.

Meanwhile, the Monroes' cafe, Porch de Salomon (Solomon's Porch), gave expatriates a warm, friendly place to hang out, eat, watch movies and listen to music. Lloyd Monroe performs in a rock 'n' roll band there several times a week, belting out old Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley and Red Hot Chili Peppers tunes.

"I expected to go down there and see the indigenous people, but I got to see the other side of the ministry, too," said Elaine Cappellino, a member of Holy Cross Anglican Church who recently returned from a mission trip. "Lloyd and Melanie build relationships with people who are broken down in life and provide a safe place for them ... I never realized that singing 'Sweet Home Alabama' could be part of a ministry."

Steve Metz, a lobbyist who also went there on a mission trip this summer, was equally impressed. "Lloyd and Melanie have become an integral part of the community," Metz said. "They're an anchor."

Being so well-known in the small community has both benefits and downsides, the couple said recently while sitting at RedEye Coffee on Thomasville Road. "You walk around everywhere, people see you all the time, so it's hard to hide," said Lloyd, now 54. "It challenges you to be authentic."

### **Getting the call**

The Monroes, who both grew up in Waukeelah, have known each other all their lives. Lloyd got a law degree from FSU and became a civil lawyer with Coppins Monroe Adkins Dincman and Spellman in Tallahassee. Melanie was a homemaker. Both went on mission trips, first to Cuba and later to Guatemala. It was while on a trip to Guatemala that Lloyd noticed the American expatriates and had the vision of starting a ministry there.

Melanie thought he was kidding, but after returning to the states, the idea wouldn't go away. Finally, the couple decided to take the plunge. Their daughter Hannah went off to college while the two younger boys, Daniel 16, and Asa, 14, went with them to Panajachel. (The boys have since come back to the U.S. to go to college.)

The city is in the highlands of Guatemala and on the edge of beautiful Lake Atitlan. The countryside is lush, and the cost of living is about a sixth of that in the United States, Lloyd said. According to toptenz.net, Panajachel is the fourth top destination for hippies. Still, the transition was hard for Melanie. "I cried for two weeks," she said. "Then I got it together. 'OK, Melanie, this is real.'"

Their first challenge was Hurricane Stan, which whipped through Guatemala about two weeks after they got there. The city was in chaos. Hundreds of homes — and the people inside — were covered by a mud slide. The Monroes immediately got to work, distributing needed items such as milk, diapers and toothbrushes. They had a video projector, so they showed movies to the kids who were hanging out and had no place to go. "If people present us with a need and we can meet that need, we'd do it," Lloyd said.

Not long after, a child prostitute was dropped off at the cafe. Soon they were involved in breaking up a prostitution ring, which led to one perpetrator getting arrested and the other leaving town, Lloyd said. But before it got resolved, they were often looking over their shoulders or ducking down in the car seat when they went through town. They knew that had made some folks angry. But they couldn't ignore the problem. They were there, after all, to make a difference.

### **Flexible, forgiving**

Metz had seen plenty of TV pictures and videos of developing countries, but he still wasn't prepared for the unrelenting poverty he witnessed as soon as he touched down in Guatemala. "The vast majority of people," he said, "were thinking about two things — how were they going to get food that day and how were they going to cook it. It makes you ashamed that you ever whined about cable TV going off."

Metz spent a week mixing cement and digging trenches to build a home for a Mayan family. Lloyd said sometimes the people aren't "deserving" in the way we might assume. Many of the homes are built for single mothers, but some include fathers who are alcoholics.

This aspect of the ministry bothered one volunteer, who wrote on the Porch de Salomon's website that she initially found the ministry "weird." "My experience has always been to swing a hammer for, and hang out with, those who 'deserve it,' " she wrote. "It's the easy and comfortable way to go. I began to realize that ministry is not supposed to be comfortable and easy." After watching a father and son work side by side to put in a septic tank and observing how the manager of the cafe dealt firmly but lovingly with a drunken customer, she finally got what the Monroes were trying to do.

Lloyd said he always encourages volunteers to be flexible. The day may start one way, but take a sharp detour in another direction because of weather, available resources or other problems. "We have to remember," he said, "we come here to serve."

Cappellino, who has been to Panajachel twice, said being in Guatemala changed her perspective. Just going into Walmart after her return was overwhelming — so many choices! "It changed how I look at life, what I have, what I need and what I don't need," she said.

But it's meeting the people that she remembers the most. "You can touch people's lives simply by having a relationship," she said. "That's what Lloyd and Melanie are focused on the most."

