

‘Someone to be there’

Greg and Sue Smith assist immigrants in finding needed medical care

Cancer, cerebral palsy, diabetes. Few experiences are more frightening than getting a serious medical diagnosis. But imagine hearing that news in a language you don’t understand — and with no relatives or friends there to help you.

For recent immigrants to the United States, it happens all too often.

When Maria, a 31-year-old single mom, found out she had diabetes, it was a lonely, isolating experience. Unable to speak English and without any family in the States to help her, the Honduran immigrant struggled to understand her illness and the complicated daily treatment regimen it would require.

“She just needed someone to be there,” said Sue Smith of Fredericksburg, Va. “In her home country, she would have a lot of relatives to help her.”

Smith and her husband, Greg — CBF field personnel — became those stand-in relatives. Serving as Spanish-English interpreters, they helped Maria get to a free clinic to be diagnosed and get medicine.

Working through the non-profit organization they co-founded, the Smiths help new immigrants adjust to life in America. And they focus on a particular niche — using a network of Christian doctors to find specialized charity medical care for immigrants with serious disabilities or diseases.

“Getting charity care isn’t always easy, and especially for ongoing type [illnesses],” said Sue. “The majority of our health-related work is centered on folks like this, people who really struggle with understanding the system and finding ways to survive in it with their disabilities and chronic health issues.”

The inspiration for the Smiths’ immigrant ministry was Katherine, a second grader

from El Salvador. Katherine’s first day in school in the United States in 2002 was terrifying. Neither she nor her family spoke any English, and no one at the school spoke Spanish. The family couldn’t explain to school officials what they most needed to know — that Katherine is deaf.

School administrators mistook Katherine’s deafness for mental retardation — and placed her in a class of students with intellectual disabilities.

“The school didn’t know what the need was and the family didn’t know what to ask for,” said Sue, a volunteer interpreter for the county school system, who was called in to help.

She immediately got Katherine into the right school situation. Then, with the school’s permission, she followed up with the family, explaining the rights and opportunities of special-ed students.

“Soon Katherine was enrolled in classes with other deaf students, where she learned sign language very quickly,” Sue said. “Sign language opened up her world. Katherine spent the rest of her school years with an in-class interpreter and focused time each day in special education to clarify what she had learned in the classroom.”

That experience also opened a new world for the Smiths.

“We started looking around and there were other agencies and organizations that needed translation help,” Sue said.

Inevitably the Smiths became involved



Greg and Sue Smith helped Maria (above) find the resources she needed to treat diabetes.

in the lives of the Hispanic immigrants, teaching them the ins and outs of living in America — from buying groceries and paying the electric bill to navigating the maze of medical and legal services.

In 2004, with another dedicated couple, the Smiths co-founded LUCHA, a Christian ministry to help Hispanic immigrants in the greater Fredericksburg area. In Spanish, LUCHA stands for Latinos United through Christ in Solidarity and Support. The Spanish word *lucha* means “struggle.”

Now LUCHA is involved in translation, English classes, tutoring, spiritual counseling, and acquiring social, legal, medical and educational services for immigrants in the Fredericksburg area. It also networks with employers, property managers, churches, schools and law enforcement to create a better social and cultural environment for Latinos.

By contributing writer Greg Warner

SERVE Are you interested in serving alongside the Smiths in Virginia? Or, want to connect with other church and individuals who are ministering among refugees and immigrants? Contact CBF staff member Chris Boltin at engage@thefellowship.info or go to www.thefellowship.info/serve to learn more.