

East Naples woman works to better lives of Third World's poor

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Sunsets at the Naples Pier are a far contrast from Penny Rambacher's journeys across impoverished Central American countries.

The images from her visits to children who live in a garbage dump are what keep Rambacher grounded and focused on her work to bring humanitarian aid to the poor.

"I couldn't sleep. I felt helpless. I felt guilty for my warm bed," said Rambacher of East Naples as she recalled her numerous encounters with the children of the dump. "There are babies born there. They live there and search for something to eat."

At a presentation Thursday, Rambacher shared some of her most moving stories from her journeys to orphanages and villages, considered some of the most destitute regions in the world.

About 50 people attended the gathering, where Rambacher showed her collection of vivid photographs depicting the struggle of the poor.

Rambacher, a flight attendant with American Airlines, is member of Airline Ambassadors, a nonprofit organization that brings humanitarian aid to Third World nations, including Guatemala, Ecuador and Peru.

Rambacher's hope is to offer a reality-check to a spoiled American society that often loses sight of what's important. As a breast cancer survivor, she said, she's learned to value her life more and find endless joy by helping others.

"I have nothing to complain about compared to these people," she said. "I've learned to be grateful. Little things that used to bother me, like traffic jams, don't anymore.

"There's a contrast of the beautiful Naples Pier in my hometown and the misery of the poor."

Among the organization's humanitarian efforts is a wheelchair drive to assist the thousands of children who are born with birth defects in Guatemala and other places as a result of malnutrition.

"The joy that I get from giving a wheelchair to a woman who has carried a child on her back — I will never forget," said Rambacher, a registered dietitian.

Thursday's presentation was impressive to Marco Islanders Carol Ginther and friend Carolyn Hunt.

"I couldn't help but be moved and impressed with what (Rambacher) is doing," Ginther said. "Her point is well taken that you really can't complain about anything here."

Hunt said, "The images are heartwrenching. It's terrible and unfortunate."

Sue Vernia, a Naples seasonal resident from Rochester, Mich., was so moved by another one of Rambacher's previous presentations, she began a campaign in her home state to collect school supplies and toothbrushes for the poor children of Central America.

Vernia will be donating 1,294 pencils and 113 toothbrushes for the upcoming Feb. 13 trip Rambacher has planned for Guatemala, at which she will be donating a dozen wheelchairs she's received from contributions.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for our schools to participate," Vernia said.

Rambacher said after the February trip that she and at least six other American Airlines executives are scheduled to visit Guatemala from March 5-8 to bring more wheelchairs.

"There's talk of partnering with us closer and help us more," Rambacher said of her employer.

To make donations, contact Rambacher at (239) 348-0815 or e-mail AirlineAngel@hotmail.com. To learn more about Airline Ambassadors, log on to www.airlineamb.org.

AT A GLANCE

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