



*Darien
Christmas
2025*



DARIEN 2025

LET THE CHILDREN COME...



Debbie and I left our home early on December 5th to begin the 13 hour drive into the heart of the Darien Province of Panama. We stopped in Panama City overnight to split up the long drive over difficult terrain.

There is no feeling in all the world quite like adding a smile to the face of one of God's precious children. The warmth, love, and appreciation these children express is a far greater gift than anything we have provided for them. We always return with our hearts full.

THE FRONTIER POLICE

We are often asked if we have any safety concerns traveling through the Darien. Most of you have probably heard the stories of drug mules and human trafficking coming through the Darien, but we have a powerful allie in the region - the Senafront border police.



From the day we arrived, the border police are by our side. This is less about protection and more about their genuine love for the people of the region. While the security aspect of their presence is plus, they come because they love the work. Their interaction with the families in the region is truly inspiring.



On the day of our arrival, the border police threw a Christmas Gala and invited us (little did we know we were the honored guests for the evening). I can't speak highly enough of the men and women who serve their country with so much empathy and compassion.

Sunday services were overflowing. The singing was inspiring and the message was on the importance of sacrifice. At the end of service, this young family came forward and prayers were offered on behalf of the new addition to their family.



As a result of all the classrooms being filled with gifts and medical supplies, the children held Bible class out on the lawn. I love how the people simply adapt without complaint.



There are two things I need to say about the children we meet here in Panama. Almost without exception the children are well-behaved and polite. Second, there is a powerful sense of family (both the biological family and the spiritual family). It reminds me of how life was growing up in the U.S.

THE CHUCUNAQUE RIVER

The real work began on Monday morning as we headed out in Lancha boats to villages up the river. The lanchas are the most common method of moving people and supplies to the rural villages. While we were loading presents, locals were loading ice, food, and drinks for daily transport.



Our boat was interesting to say the least. The guide had a small bucket made out of a milk jug and was emptying water the entire time we traversed the river. Then about half way up I heard a loud noise (similar to what it sounds like when you throw a rod in a car). The boat stalled, but fortunately, the guide got us going quickly and the rest of the day was without incident.



I asked the guide which way we were heading and pointed forward and said, "hacia Columbia," or toward Columbia. I'm not sure how far we traveled up the river, or how near we were to Columbia, but at the end of the Panamerican highway, you are 53 miles from Columbia, so I am sure we were still a good distance away.

When we arrived at the first village, we were seated and some of the young girls performed a traditional dance for us. Local artisans had had woven crafts out for sale and again we were treated royally by the local leaders of the community.



At the start of the program, an invocation was about to be offered and I caught this picture a little girl preparing for the opening prayer.



I can't begin to convey how deeply your heart is moved when you see the living conditions in the region and realize just how blessed we are. Despite living in simple wood or mud huts and having little in this world there is a genuine sense of happiness in the eyes of these children. I'm quickly reminded that all my riches mean little if I am not using them for good (1 John 3:17).

There is a sad side to what we see in these villages. There are children everywhere and it is hard at times to tell if a child is being held by an older sibling or a teen mother. Sexual abuse is significantly higher in Central America (but rarely reported). Just one more reason to bring the gospel and a bit of happiness to this part of the world.



Everywhere we travel children seem to pour out of the woodwork. Once we begin unloading it starts with a trickle, then a stream, ending in a flood of children lined up awaiting a Christmas gift. I always try to keep watch for the shy children in the background. They are easily overlooked if you are not paying attention.

As we move from village to village I am thankful for the program (and it serves a valuable purpose), but I am more convinced than ever we need to seek long-term solutions that include having locals run, direct, and implement efforts that teach Jesus to the lost.

It is a challenging week traveling down back roads, up and down the Chucunaqua River, and fighting off the blistering Panama heat and humidity, but I wouldn't have it any other way. The rewards far exceed any sacrifices that we might have made.



Day two we traveled by bus to local schools and villages. The highlight of was visiting a special needs school in the region. I have so much respect for the teachers and administrators. This type of program is rare in Panama and it's not as if it was designed for those who are autistic or have down's syndrome. It was a group of children thrown together who could not function in the public systems. There were those with severe conditions and those more mild. After spending time in each classroom, I was overwhelmed emotionally by the loving nature of every child.

When I arrived in the first class, a young friend (Milo) grabbed my hand and started introducing me to the other children. I had met Milo in 2024 and he and his sister adopted us. He continued to be my mini-me throughout the trip. It was touching to watch a 10 year-old boy treat his fellow classmates with such love and tenderness.



In a country that is not known for being handicap-friendly, this school is pearl buried in the jungles of the Darien. Teachers, students, and volunteers who care enough to make a difference abound.



Our final day was spent visiting some of the indigenous schools and passing out gifts at the church and medical clinic. As we pulled into one particular school I am reminded of a young woman we met last year - Yari Kimes (pronounces Yadi). Her picture is in the middle-right of the page.



Yari was born in this indigenous community and became a Christian at an early age. With some help from the Brady's she learned English, got a good education and went on to college at Freed-Hardeman University. There she met her husband Evan who is now in the Space Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

When I see most of these children, I am reminded that few will have the opportunities that Yari received, but when we care enough to make a real difference, lives can be changed forever. More importantly, they are changed eternally.

Yari not only has a better life now, but married to Christian man, both with promising careers, she will have a life few from her village will ever know. More importantly, she has the promise of eternal life in Christ Jesus.



A couple weeks back I shared a story of a young woman Daryelis Mayu, the daughter of a local widow. Daryelis is fifth in her class and will be studying bio-medical engineering in college here in David, Panama.

Debbie and I are committed to seeing she has every opportunity to succeed **here in her own culture**. For somewhere between \$50-\$75 a month we will be able to assist her in getting her college education and escaping the poverty she has grown up with.

PANAMA 2026

LONG-TERM OUTCOMES



Everywhere I look I see children and families with little or no opportunity to improve their lives. Over the past 40 years of working in multiple countries I have watched as churches and individuals go into regions with all the best intentions, but little or no understanding of how to build long-term sustainability. By now you may think I am beating a dead horse, but we need to educate people on how to make local mission work self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating.

Every mission effort and missionary should be required to read, “When helping hurts,” by Stephen Corbett and Brian Fokker, and “The Ugly American,” by Eugene Burdick and William J. Lederer.

While these two books have very different premises (one is on U.S. diplomacy, the other on international aid), the principle is similar. Entering another culture with no idea of what we are doing, or a long-term plan for success multiplies our failures.



I am asking you to read our long-term plan on the downloads page of our website: <https://mision-panama.org/downloads>. The file is entitled “Bible Vocational Institute.” There are also other supporting documents concerning our plans for Western Panama over the next few years. We ask that your prayerfully consider supporting a plan built on creating long-term sustainability.



If you want to help support long-term solutions in Panama, there is a donate link on our website, or you can send your contribution to: Creekside Church of Christ, Misión Panamá. 3949 Lithia Pinecrest Road, Valrico, FL 33596. Be sure to earmark the envelope and check: Mission Panama.