Some families hike up to five hours each way, climbing hills and crossing streams along their journey, for a regular dental and/or medical checkup at Los Encinitos, Honduras. "If our patients arrive on a donkey or a horse, it is because they are well off." Art Babineau, D.M.D. ’52 adds. "Some get up at 2 a.m. to start to walk. They arrive looking like they just jogged, then they stand in a long line and wait for our gate to open so they can run to the registration table. It’s amazing!"

Yes, medical and dental care in Honduras has come a long way since 1989, when Cape CARES (Central American Relief Efforts) sent its first relief team to Tela, on Honduras’s north coast. Providing free medical and dental service to people in remote areas where there is no access to on-going treatment, Cape CARES sends teams to three Honduran locations, making two or three trips to each site for a total of 8 to 10 visits annually.

Los Encinitos

The clinic that Art and Don work from is located in Los Encinitos, San Marcos, approximately 35 miles SSE of Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital. Los Encinitos is a small collection of homes clustered around a compound originally established as an orphanage by a Honduran nun, Sr. María Ignisia Díaz. There is a small medical clinic with three examining offices and a storage room. The dental office is located in a spacious building and teams are housed in a large building with two rooms and fed by a local man. The nun and her family also do the cleaning and ironing of the teams’ laundry.

Trips to Los Encinitos are conducted two times each year (May and November), and each team consists of 15 to 20 people (three to four dentists, three physicians, and support personnel including translators, nurses, dental assistants and hygienists). All team members are volunteers and each pays his or her own way, approximately $1,000 per year, which is financed by each individual or through fundraising.

Art has also begun to train two Honduran women and one Honduran man to assist the team with dental work during their trips. "Our goal is to have some of the locals take over some of the burden," Don said.

Getting Involved with Cape CARES

Both Don and Art were approached about making a relief trip to Honduras. "I was approached by a local [Fitchburg] pediatrician in 1992, and he had read about this group traveling to Honduras to do medical/dental relief work," Lemay recalled. "He asked me what I was doing at the end of the month. I told him I was working. He told me that I would be working, but not here, because you’re coming to Honduras with me! And I went. Relief work was something that I had always wanted to do, and I loved the experience...but it was frustrating."

Where we first went down, I was doing nothing but extraction dentistry, and it was frustrating to know that these teeth could be saved and other things could be done to help these people. We were treating patients, who were sitting in a folding chaise lounge chair, with no electricity and no running water. I knew if we were going to commit to this community we had to upgrade things.

In 1994-95, I got a good friend of ours, Jim Picone, involved. He had set up his dental office with plumbing and electricity and I knew he could help us. Thanks to Jim’s efforts and generous support from Rotary International, the Wachusett District Dental Society, the Tilton Committee at Immaculate Conception in Nashua, NH, and various fundraisers, we now have a four-chair dental clinic with electricity, compressed air, water, handpieces...now we practice dentistry there almost the way we do here. We also have patients’ charts, which helps provide a continuity of care, and as of last year, the charts were all com-