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Bringing healing and hope through song

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New chief Adventist mission officer, Ismael Gama, emphasizes collaboration

Q: You joined AMITA Health in June as senior vice president and chief Adventist mission officer. What is your background?

A: I most recently was executive director of Behavioral Health and Wellness at Adventist HealthCare's Washington Adventist Hospital in Takoma Park, Md. I had previous positions at Adventist HealthCare hospitals in Maryland, and also was a pastor of Sligo Church in Takoma Park.

Q: What attracted you to AMITA Health?

A: The main attraction was having the Adventists and Catholics coming together to keep their mission going. It was exciting to see how we could integrate our mission of "extending the healing ministry of Jesus" in our markets and communities. I thought, "This is something new, and I want to be part of it."

I am working with Mary Paul, interim chief Catholic mission integration officer. The Catholic and Adventist traditions have some differences, but we have much more in common. For all of us, extending the healing ministry of Jesus means to have that compassion, to have that sense of justice.

Q: Central to mission integration are the mission trips. What are you working on now in terms of both local and international trips?

A: In our first Mission at Home in last June in Harvey [Ill.], we served 207 patients in one day, which was amazing. We plan to have two domestic missions a year, starting April 27 in Harvey. These missions re-energize the people who participate. It's a hard day working, but it reconnects us to why we came to health-care to begin with.

I and about 30 others are going to El Salvador in November for our next Global Medical Mission. After this trip, we will take a short break to restructure our international missions a little, especially to involve some of our administrators to visit with administrators overseas. We want to form a kind of partnership of the heart, almost like sister cities. That will help create a continuum of care.

Q: What are some of the other new initiatives on which you are working?

A: We are very aware that any interaction anywhere within our system has a spiritual component. We are treating the whole person — mind, body and spirit — for associates and patients alike. We have several ongoing programs in this area.

For example, we have begun a program called Clinical Mission Integration, which provides spiritual support for



Photo by Jim Svehla

▲ New chief Adventist mission officer, Ismael Gama

our associates in the outpatient setting. We also are training interested people throughout within the system to be spiritual ambassadors. They act as a type of first responders for those who need spiritual care, supporting them, praying with them, or just listening.

We have a program called No One Dies Alone, or NODA, to teach volunteers how to be with a dying person. At a recent meeting in Bolingbrook, more than 200 people from the community came out to volunteer for NODA, when we expected only 30 to 40. And we just started a program in cooperation with local academies that is designed to promote healthy lifestyles among young people.

We try to find ways to meet the needs of people both inside and outside AMITA Health. We are very careful to make sure that the integration of our mission has more than an internal focus, because we are serving entire communities. ■

Julie Busch, associate vice president, Internal Communications, AMITA Health

Bringing healing and hope through song

Department of Music teaches lessons at local prisons

Every Thursday morning, six to 10 incarcerated teenagers at the Saint Joseph Correctional Facility in Berrien County, Mich., attend a music lesson hosted by the Andrews University Department of Music. It also holds a weekly Saturday music education program for 12–15 male inmates at the Westville Correctional Facility in Indiana.

Adriana Perera, chair of the Department of Music, has been going to Saint Joseph since January 2018. This smaller program only allows one music teacher to attend at a time. The Westville Saturday program, also known as the "Beyond Bars" ministry, started in October. At that time, 28 Andrews University music faculty, staff and students volunteered and attended a training session provided by Rod Kitchen, the Westville Correctional Community Service coordinator. Currently the group rotates so that approximately 5–7 students and faculty attend each week. Inmates are given music theory, keyboard, guitar and singing lessons.

The inspiration for this outreach came from an experience Perera had as a music teacher in Spain. She would go with the choir to the prison there and sing for special occasions, like Christmas or Easter. A choir member friend of Perera's visited the prison every Saturday and eventually initiated a choir. She and her husband, both musicians, led the choir for 10 years in Valencia. Perera says, "Their testimony has been an inspiration for me. Now my husband and I are leading this local prison ministry project together. He also is an educator, and loves to sing and teach songs in several languages."



David Quero

▲ Adriana Perera, right, with a group of volunteers as they prepare to visit the Westville Correctional Facility in Indiana.

Even though the prison outreach is relatively new, the results are beautiful. Students in Saint Joseph are writing melodic dictations, and some are now able to play an excerpt from Beethoven's "Für Elise," or the first few bars of "Lean on Me." In Westville, prisoners continually express their love of the program and their excitement to participate. Perera shares, "Each Saturday when we finally arrive and get to the room (after going through many security procedures), they are already sitting and anxiously waiting for the class to start. That is moving to see!"

While it is indeed a challenge to attend every week, the end goal is to find more volunteers to participate in Saint Joseph so there is a rotating schedule like Westville. Furthermore, Perera also is working hard to establish a choir in Westville and have them sing for

Christmas and other special events. There is, in fact, a theater inside the correctional facility, and the Department of Music would like to present a music recital there at least once a year.

"Music is powerful beyond words and can do what words alone can never do. When you go to the prison, you see how music brings light and joy to the lives of these people," shares Perera. "Music touches their hearts, connects with their souls. It brings a smile to their faces and, oftentimes, tears. Melody and rhythm help them to remember the lyrics, so when we sing 'Amazing Grace,' you know its message has been planted in their heart and will resonate in them during the week. That is my favorite part and the most rewarding aspect of this ministry." ■

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