WHAT A TEAM!!

By Scott Pike

The Enfoque Ixcán/Amigos Eye Care 2017 August trip to Ixcán, Guatemala has been completed and was highly successful.

Before journeying to Ixcán, my wife, Joene, and I visited 7 Rotary meetings in 9 days. Our intent was to inform people in Guatemala about what Enfoque Ixcán has been doing in their country these past 20 years and to encourage them to donate and join our awesome donors in the U.S. in a partnership which will allow Enfoque Ixcán to continue to grow and flourish. All of the clubs we visited are considering how they can help us. Some of the ideas, besides donating money, include hosting fundraising events and providing services for the construction of our clinic.

In Ixcán, in just 4 days of clinics our team of students, doctors, lay-volunteers and Guatemalan helpers examined 1209 patients. Over 580 pairs of glasses were dispensed and 70 people were referred for surgeries at a local Guatemalan eye clinic called Visualiza, www.visualiza.org.gt. The exams and glasses were given at no cost and the surgeries will be paid for by Enfoque Ixcán.

We visited two beautiful, remote villages where we examined the students in the primary schools, the teachers and many of the adults of the villages. Part of our work was done out of doors in the sun. Other testing was done in classrooms with very little ventilation, so the heat and humidity were stifling. But, the children were beautiful and full of energy and the adults were quick to thank us for coming to their village. This was the first time 95% of them had ever had their eyes tested.

Our optometry students practiced their emerging skills, we all learned
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something about the rigors of life in a remote part of the world, and many people without access to basic eye care were able to experience clear, comfortable vision for the first time. This was a win-win-win adventure.

Our hearts were touched by the gratitude of women and men living in extreme poverty, and we were awed by the resilience and spirit of hard working people who lack many of the opportunities we have been afforded. We heard many times, as the patients shook our hands to leave, “Gracias a Dios por usted y su ayuda.” (Thank God for you and your help.) The trip was a success because of the hard work of our team of volunteers. Besides bringing eye care to these people, we showed them that someone in the world cares, that their lives matter.

The Little Boy in the Red Shirt

By Grace H. Anderson

As a third-year optometry student at Pacific University, an international trip with AMIGOs Eye Care was something I've wanted to do since I applied to optometry school. The non-profit organization, AMIGOs has trips all over the world, providing eye care to rural and underserved areas since the 1970s. This past August I had the opportunity to travel to Guatemala with AMIGOs and Enfoque Ixcán. It was a trip I will never forget.

Over the course of four clinic days, our team saw over 1200 patients. The team included five doctors, six students, three volunteers, and one optician, and they were the best group of individuals I could have imagined for the long, hot days. Patients came to visit us with problems ranging from the need for a minor correction with glasses, to vision-impairing cataracts, and some with diseases and disorders that we would have never seen in patients in the States.

Of all the patients that I had the opportunity to interact with, the patient that I remember the most was a six-year old boy named Juan. He was a first-grader at the school in San Carlos where we traveled to during our second day of clinic. He was a spunky little boy wearing a bright red t-shirt and small rubber boots, smiling the entire time and acting a little bashful to my [poorly spoken Spanish] small talk.

At first glance, one wouldn’t expect anything wrong with Juan. Following visual acuities, however, it was apparent that he could hardly see anything more than a few inches away from his eyes. He also had a side-to-side “wiggle” about his eyes, a disorder known as nystagmus.

It was our goal to find the underlying cause of the nystagmus and determine what we could do to improve his vision.

When looking at the health of the back of his eyes, the cause of the nystagmus was obvious. Juan had toxoplasmosis that had infected both eyes and he had scars from the disease surrounding both of his macula,
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the area of the back of the eye responsible for central, detailed, and color vision. The appearance of his retina was something that I had only seen in textbooks and class lectures. Toxoplasmosis is a parasitic infection that can be transmitted by consuming under-cooked meats, exposure to the parasite found in cat feces, or via the placenta of a pregnant mother. It can be treated when caught early, but once scars are present, there is no way to restore the cells in the eye and regain vision. It is likely that Juan has had toxoplasmosis since birth and has never had central fixation in his vision, which has caused the nystagmus.

After seeing the scars on his retinas, I had to take a step back and take a moment to process what I had seen and talk with Dr. Jessica Lynch about what we could do for Juan. Unfortunately, at this stage in the disease, nothing could be done to restore Juan’s vision, but special accommodations for his condition could be done to help him find other ways to complete school work (such as magnifiers).

I gave him a pair of Spiderman sunglasses, held his hand, and we walked across the courtyard to discuss the findings with his teacher. Other students formed a circle around us, commenting about the new sunglasses with smiles and laughter. When we found his teacher, one of our volunteers, Claudia Yakos, helped translate the information about Juan’s condition and the unfortunate fact that his vision will never improve. As Juan heard what was being said, his hand went limp in mine and his head hung to his chest. After our conversation, the once smiley six-year old went to the back of his classroom and started to cry. It was, to say the least, heartbreaking.

Though Juan’s story did not have the “happy ending” that I wished it could have had. Juan is not the last patient that I will see with a sight-threatening condition, but he will be the one that I will remember the most. Following my experience with Juan, it is my hope that our organizations can integrate a component in trips that educates teachers and community members about how to improve the lives of individuals with low vision in rural communities across the globe.

Service Above Self  by Susan Winterbourne – Rotarian – Rotary Club of Forest Grove Daybreak, Oregon

I had been involved in international service projects as a non-Rotarian, but in August 2017 I had my first chance to truly do “service above self” as a Rotary member. This opportunity to participate, was memorable. Our group included another Rotarian, Claudia Yakos, and other like-minded, service oriented people from the Pacific University Amigos Eye Care program, and our Rotary International Global Grant partner, Enfoque Ixčán.

First, Guatemala is striking in its beauty and diversity. Guatemala City is a bustling metropolitan area, with many historical sites and trendy new areas. Yet, just outside of Guatemala City, in the areas where we worked and visited, Guatemala is like I remember from my visit over 40 years ago – very rural and poor, yet colorful, and majestic.

Second, Guatemala’s needs are great. An estimated 75% of the population live below the poverty level. In the Ixčán region of the country, it’s 82%. Charitable organizations, such as Amigos, Enfoque Ixčán, and Rotary, do make a difference in quality of life. In one day, our group examined over 400 people, and over 32 of those needed cataract surgery to achieve some level of functional vision.

This is made possible by partnerships developed by Dr. Scott Pike of Enfoque Ixčán, bringing together skilled professionals (Amigos Eye Care), a local medical eye clinic, named Visualiza, and funding sources such as
Rotary and others. Over four days we saw over 1200 adults and children, dispensed over 1000 sunglasses, and nearly 600 reading or other prescriptions eye glasses.

This was not easy work – our days started by 7am and ended around 7pm, in very hot and humid conditions. While we all felt the exhaustion, I have never worked with a more dedicated, hardworking, and caring group of people.

Finally, by participating in this project, it is clear that Rotary’s expectation “to develop sustainable practices” is possible and makes sense. Many areas throughout the world have depended on international aide programs to bring medical practitioners to local communities by holding clinics for the masses, and addressing issues on the spot. Yet what happens between those visits? Who follows up when medical needs cannot be addressed at the time, or when those benevolent organizations move to other areas or countries?

In Ixcán, Enfoque Ixcán’s goal is to develop new skills within communities by training eye health promoters and community nurses, providing them with tools and supplies to use in the field to test eyes and vision. Then utilize local Guatemalan resources when professional eye care is needed, like the medical eye clinic Visualiza, for eye surgeries. In the long term, local Rotarians can use their connections and resources to help insure a continuation of funding for necessary medical interventions, eyeglasses, and hosting volunteers from programs such as Amigos.