FOCUSING ON THE IXCÁN

EYE CARE AND EYE HEALTH EDUCATION FOR THE PEOPLE OF THE IXCÁN REGION OF GUATEMALA

ENFOQUE IXCÁN

Volume 15 Issue 1 Spring 2019

SPOTLIGHT ON SALVADOR CASTRO

by Scott Pike

When I first saw Salvador coming toward me wearing his straw hat, I was taken back to my youth, living in Montana. Many of my father's friends were ranchers and farmers, and straw hats were the summer fashion. Here in Salvador's village of Santa Maria Tzejá, it felt like summer. The temperature was in the 90's. We found a shady place to sit and talk.

Salvador is a 63 year old farmer who has lived in this, his village, since he was a teenager. He was in the second group of pioneers to settle this area in about 1971. Back then getting here was not easy.

"We, (men, women and children), walked over the mountains on a jungle path that had to be cleared with machetes. It took 7 days to make the trip," Salvador told me. They arrived to a place they had never seen before, carrying everything they owned and needed on their backs. The jungle heat and humidity was quite different from the mountainous country they had been living in. "It took some getting used to," he said with a smile.

But, for the opportunity to own his own land, it was all worth it. No more plantation work picking coffee 12 hours a day or spending much of the year farther south toiling on the sugar cane plantations, earning barely enough to feed and clothe a family. The trip over the mountains was a chance to be free of the slave driving plantation owners.

Now, fast forward through 48 years of clearing the land, building houses from the jungle, establishing a farm to grow his family's food, raising children, fleeing to Mexico during a civil war, and returning 12 years later to start over again.

A few years ago Salvador met a new challenge. His eyesight began to progressively fail. The 1 ½ hour walk on the rutted path to his farmland was often interrupted by falls, and seeing friends a short distance away was difficult.

He had heard about Enfoque Ixcán, the eye care service for the Ixcán region of Guatemala. The nearest eye doctor was about 6 hours away and costly for people like him who had no money for luxuries such as eye care.

Enfoque Ixcán has trained local people to perform basic eye care testing and had made arrangements with a Guatemalan eye clinic, called Visualiza, which provides inexpensive professional care for the poor.

Last November, Salvador joined a group of 25 people from the Ixcán region. One of Enfoque Ixcán's eye health promoters, Felipe, escorted them for

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Salvador Castro

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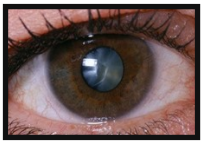
cataract surgeries. Enfoque Ixcán, pays $125, half of the cost of the 5-hour bus trip, a hotel room for 2 nights and the surgery. Salvador's cost was about $35.

Typical landscape farmers traverse to reach their parcela (farm)

Salvador exclaimed, "Now I see like I did when I was young!" He plans to have surgery on his other eye with the next group going in May. As I watched Salvador briskly walk away, it was hard to imagine that 3 months ago he was literally blind and unable to walk on his own.

The kind and generous support from donors like you make these miracles happen for Salvador and his neighbors in Ixcán. THANK YOU!



WHEN IS IT TIME TO HAVE CATARACT SURGERY?

This is a question most cataract patients ponder over, often with fear and trepidation about someone cutting on their eye. Do I wait until my night driving is scary for my wife? Is it time when I can no longer see the little box with the soccer score on the television?

Well, I heard a new one on my last trip to Ixcán, Guatemala, and this may be the best yet. An elderly farmer knew his sight was failing due to cataracts. Seeing his friends' faces was hard. He had trouble on the rutted path to his farmland. It was an hour walk and he would often stumble and fall.

One day while walking carefully along the path he noticed someone had left a metal pipe on the path. "Why would anyone do this?" he thought. So, he stopped to pick it up. He didn't need one more thing to trip him.

The metal pipe turned out to be a snake! Although it was poisonous, he reacted quickly and no harm was done to him or the snake. When he got home, he called Felipe, at Enfoque Ixcán, to find out when the next surgical trip would be. (Not soon enough!) He now goes to and from his farmland with confidence.
Now you know when it's time…

CLINIC PROGRESS

You did it!! Last year Enfoque Ixcán reached out to you to help raise $10,000 for our new clinic building. **Together we smashed it, raising closer to $11,000**. I swear Enfoque Ixcán has the BEST donors in the world. You have invested in our cause and we work every day to make sure your donations are spent wisely and efficiently for the good people of Ixcán, Guatemala.

It was 2013 when we started planning for our own clinic building. We never expected that 6 years later we would still be planning. This was supposed to be a 2 year project.

The latest twist on the journey's path is that we now may have 2 places to build. One is the land given to us by the Municipal government and the other is on the campus of the new Ixcán hospital, which is presently under construction. ***(cont'd on pp 4)***

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CLINIC PROGRESS … ***Continued from page 2***

The hospital ground was where we originally intended to build, but due to government corruption (someone was skimming money off the hospital construction budget) the project was delayed for 3 years. We looked for and found a new location, the Municipal land.

Discussing possibly building the clinic on hospital land.

As we were preparing to build on the donated land, the public health people got word that resumption of the construction of the hospital was imminent. This location is preferable to Enfoque Ixcán due to accessibility, security and cost issues.

So, just to keep you in the know, our board of directors has not planned any meetings at exotic, beachfront locations or granted any executive bonuses. The money for the clinic is in the bank waiting for a decision regarding our building site. We will start construction as soon as we are able to reach agreeable terms with the Ministry of Health. Failing that, we will build on the Municipal land.

Either way, the end is in sight. What looked like a 2 year project, then looked like a lifetime project, is now right around the corner. [Fingers crossed] **Thanks for investing in and trusting Enfoque Ixcán with your donations.** In the 6 years of this clinic project, your donations have also funded 519 eye surgeries and made Enfoque Ixcán a success in every way.

YOU ARE THE BEST!