FOCUSING ON IXCÁN

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

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AMIGOS EYE CARE TRIP

by Mary Avisado
Optometry class of 2024; Amigos president, 2022

In August 2022, a team of four doctors along with nine optometry students from Pacific University AMIGOS Eye Care embarked on the first Enfoque Ixcán/ AMIGOS international eye care mission trip since 2019, due to the pandemic.

The clinic days were challenging, but nothing could compare to the hardships in life that the people of Ixcán, Guatemala face. Yet, each of them greeted us with a kind smile and were so gracious to us every step of the way.

I will never forget the one gentleman we helped on this trip. He entered the clinic accompanied by his family members because he could barely see. He was an older man and at his age, the loss of vision could be easily thought to be due to cataracts, pterygium, or other eye disorders common in the area.

We found the best glasses prescription for him, but we were surprised that his overall eye health was relatively normal considering his extremely poor vision at the start. At the end of his exam, we escorted him to the optical station where he could get a new pair of glasses. When he tried them on and looked at his family members, he began crying because it was the first time, in a long time, that he was able to see their faces. He immediately hugged our team members and expressed how thankful he was that we came and made time to see him.

It was then that I realized that we can change a person's life in seconds through the basic services that we provide. I would not have traded this experience for anything in the world.

This trip was a bittersweet reminder of the inequalities and disparities that continue to exist in health care, and AMIGOS Eye Care is eager to help Enfoque Ixcán work towards a better eye care future for the people we serve. http://amigoseyecare.org/

A TEAM EFFORT

by Jessica Lynch, OD & Enfoque Ixcán board of directors member

This August, we had the privilege of resuming our joint Enfoque/Pacific University Amigos Eye Care mission trips to Ixcán, Guatemala. We were excited to see patients again!

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The team consisted of nine optometry students (Mary Avisado, Karma Castro, Ellisha Fog, Joshua Fleegel, Paige Needham, Jordan Garcia, Brianna Johnson, Karen Watson and Alexis Snodgrass), four optometrists (Drs. Jessica Lynch, Aaron Wiens, Heather Cowie and Oliver Rosales), an optician (Jason Anderson) and a Guatemalan photo journalist (Regina Perez).

We held 4 days of clinics in 3 different communities and were able to examine 755 patients, 356 glasses were dispensed, plus dozens of sunglasses, and 50 patients were diagnosed with cataracts. These patients will be receiving Enfoque Ixcán funded cataract surgeries in the next 2 months.

The Amigos students were moved by the experience. Many are already eager to join other Amigos teams in the future. Josh Fleegel's experience was similar with the other students. He said, *"I will never forget the patient that came in with the biggest smile on his face and the most heart-lifting spirit. He was extremely grateful throughout the entirety of the exam, and even more grateful when we gave him his glasses."* The trip was life changing for the patients and students.

After each day of seeing patients, the doctors spent the evenings training our Eye Health Promoters at Enfoque Ixcán's new clinic in Playa Grande. We were very excited to see how our new clinic and equipment is benefiting the people in Ixcán.

To experience some of the flavor of the trip and see the team in action watch a video overview of on our website, www.enfoqueixcan.org

AUGUST TRIP INTERVIEWS *by Regina Perez, a Guatemalan journalist*

Regina accompanied the August mission trip team. She grew up in Ixcán and agreed to interview several of the patients who came for eye exams. The following stories from her interviews, have been edited for length and clarity.

Martina Ramírez is 70 years old and lives in the village of Nuevas Ilusiones, Ixcán. Martina came to have her eyes examined where the EI/Amigos team held their clinics. When questioned about her trip to the clinic she said, "*I need to see and because of poverty in this region of the country, eye care is not affordable. That's why I came here. The people that have money, they don't need to come here, but I do*".

She and her husband moved from southern Guatemala to Ixcán years ago because her family of 12 children needed the land and the government had made some available for the poor to purchase.

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Martina

Martina had noticed that her vision has been blurry for several years. "There are days in which I can't see well," she complained. Her examination found that she has cataracts, so she will need surgery. Martina hopes that the surgery goes well and that "with the help of God and the wisdom of the doctors, I will be able to see again."

Telma Sarita is a resident of Las Rosas, Ixcán. Eight years ago, she fell and injured her eye. Her mother said that she is only able to see with her right eye. When she had the accident, her parents took her to the eye hospital in a town located 5 hours away from their village. The doctors stopped the infection, but they said, "She won't be able to see with that eye."

Telma and her mother

Telma Sarita is 17 years old and has only finished sixth grade, because her parents don't have the money to pay for education. They have 5 children and only one is currently attending school.

Her family grows corn in Las Rosas and sometimes the men go to nearby villages looking for work. "We don't have work here," her mother said. "Everything is so expensive." They aren't always able to sell the corn they harvest. Most of their crop is for family consumption. "Life here is very difficult." the mother said.

Telma and her mother came to the clinic for an eye exam, to make sure her right eye is healthy and seeing well, which it is. She was given sunglasses to help protect her eye from the sun and additional injuries.

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SCOTT AND ENFOQUE IXCÁN RECOGNITION *by Joene Pike, EI newsletter editor*

PU president, Dr. Jennifer Coyle, presents Scott with his award

In September, Scott and EI were recognized twice. The first event was at the annual "Eye Ball", a fundraiser for the AMIGOS optometry student eye care organization. This event is the primary public fundraiser to raise support for AMIGOS humanitarian trips abroad.

During the "Eye Ball", Scott provided a recap of EI's long term presence in Guatemala and board member/optometrist, Jessica Lynch, gave a summary of the latest EI/Pacific University Amigos trip she led.

The second event was at an alumni dinner and awards ceremony during PU's homecoming weekend. Scott was, belatedly due to the pandemic, given an "Outstanding Alumni 2020" award for his work developing and sustaining the EI program in Guatemala which also includes the now twice-yearly trips with the Pacific University (PU) Amigos optometry students.

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I'm so pleased Scott has received recognition for his dedication to those in need of eye care where it has been the only source of care for so many of the residents of the Ixcán area. I so admire my husband and am very proud of the work he has done and continues to do in establishing eye care for those in need. I'm one lucky gal to be married to such an awesome, caring man! (PS he's embarrassed that I wrote this!)

AN EASY WAY TO DONATE

Everyone has a will, right? Charitable bequests, often referred to as planned or legacy giving, are donations set forth in your will or trust. Charitable bequests insure the sustainability of Enfoque Ixcán, currently in its 25th year of existence. It's a way to give now, but pay later. The procedure is very simple, just tell your attorney how much you would like to include in your will for Enfoque Ixcán. The attorney will need to document our tax ID number and address. Through your donation, you can be assured that quality eye care (glasses, eye surgeries and eye health education) will continue to benefit the deserving people of Ixcán, Guatemala, into the future.

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