

FOCUSING ON IXCÁN

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

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A SMILE MAKES THE WORLD GO AROUND

by Hifza Sultana Rai, 3rd year optometry student, Pacific University

My experience traveling to Guatemala and providing eye exams was unforgettable, to say the least. Seeing hundreds of new faces light up because they were finally able to read their Bible or because they got cool new sunglasses is something I will cherish forever.

But among those hundreds of faces, there is one special one I will never forget. It was our second clinic day, and we drove 2 hours from our base in Playa Grande to provide eye exams to children at a local public school. I was inside doing ophthalmoscopy (examining the inside of the eye) for the second half of the day. Part of that role was sending the patients we had just seen, outside to the optical eyeglass dispensing area.

It was while making these rounds back and forth from the classroom to our makeshift optical that I met a young boy, maybe 12 years old. He was sitting on a chair next to the optical, barefoot and hunched over. I, in the rush of trying to get as many patients seen as possible, accidentally stepped on his foot. The first time it happened, I immediately apologized, and that's when he looked up and smiled at me with his toothless grin. I asked him for his name, and it was then that I realized he was unable to speak.

Throughout the remainder of the day, I kept accidentally stepping on his foot, but he would always smile and give me a thumbs up, signifying he was alright. It was towards the end of the day that he left his seat and made his way into the classroom. We had started packing up, but when I saw him, I knew I had to take a selfie with him because there was something so special about him. As soon as I pulled my phone out, his eyes lit up, and he put his arm over my shoulder and started posing. After I was done taking the selfies, he motioned towards my phone and started taking selfies himself! To my surprise, he was very well-versed with the iPhone and knew exactly where the camera app was and how to use it. He was quickly shoed away by a local community member, an occurrence that seemed almost too familiar to him.

As we made our way back to the bus, there he was again, at the doorstep of our bus, ready to say goodbye to all of us. He started making his rounds, shaking everyone's hand, but when it came to my turn, he took my hand and pulled me in to embrace me with the biggest bear hug I've ever received.

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Fellow student Chandler in the optical eyeglass dispensing area



The selfie

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The Bear Hug!

I was honestly in a state of shock, but from what my peers tell me, the way he hugged me was as if I were a long-lost friend or someone that meant a lot to him.

Truthfully, I don't even think we gave him an eye exam. We learned afterwards that he didn't even attend the school due to his disabilities and the school's lack of resources for special needs kids. But I guess to him being acknowledged and spoken to is what made me so special because, just like him sitting in the corner of the optical or being shoed away by an adult, it seemed like he is used to just being on the sidelines.

I wished there was more we could do for that little boy, but it gives me comfort knowing that just by having a few conversations with him, I was able to give him so much happiness, even if it was just for a few moments. And although I learned so much in terms of optometry during this trip, I think the most valuable thing I learned is that kindness, even as

little as smiling at someone, can truly change the world.

ENFOQUE IXCÁN and AMIGOS JOIN FORCES *by Scott Pike*

Last March Enfoque Ixcán joined forces with Amigos Eye Care on a mission trip to Ixcán. That was our 19th trip together. There were 7 Amigos students (Chandler Grainger, Mary Avisado, Hifza Rai, Tanvi Manak, Jasmeet Brar, Tomas Sundet, and Nathan Patterson). Brian

Arvidson and myself were the doctors for the trip and Joene Pike helped with

glasses dispensing and checking visual acuities. Our Eye Health Promotors, Felipe, Carlos and Roxana completed the team, filling in wherever needed.

Even though it was a relatively small group, we did big things. In only 3 days of clinics, we saw 540 patients and dispensed 340 pairs of glasses. We also identified over 50 people needing cataract surgeries. The majority of these people have already had their surgeries on at least one eye.

So, 340 people now have improved vision and nearly 50 are now enjoying restored sight. But, just as important to our success are the generous donors who funded the surgeries, paid for the glasses and allow Enfoque Ixcán to continue its work.

To help you understand one of the surprise values of these mission trips, be sure to read the front page story in this newsletter by Hifza Rai. She had a very meaningful encounter with an Ixcán resident and came away with a little different outlook on life.

The trip was not all work. On the way home we stopped at Lachua, a beautiful, nearby national park for a hike and a swim. Then the students went on to Guatemala's iconic Lake Atitlan, which is flanked by 3 volcanos.

Thanks to all who contributed: students, doctors, volunteers, health promotors, our Guatemalan hosts, and our faithful donors.



An unexpected surprise



Amigos and the Enfoque Ixcán team

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Have you noticed the increasing cost of living; gas, food, health care, garbage collection, you name it? It never ends and I'm pretty sure it will never go back to previous levels. My basis for inflation goes back to 1959 when I bought my first pair of Levi 501 jeans. They cost me \$3.75!! It seemed like a lot at the time.



Recently, I ran across a list of the prices we used to pay for cataract surgeries for our patients in Guatemala, \$65. That was in 2005. **Now we pay \$257 for the same surgery**, and this is a deeply discounted, social service price. A private patient at the same Guatemalan clinic pays \$1,260 and here in the U.S. a cataract surgery has a value of \$3,000.

All of these numbers show me 2 things: 1) Even with significant inflation we're still getting an excellent service from Visualiza, our surgery clinic partner. 2) Inflation is reducing the number surgeries Enfoque Ixcán is able to fund; unless, of course, we're able to receive more donations. I'm inviting you to help us conquer the effects of inflation with your financial support by donating today and increasing your annual gift.

Enfoque Ixcán's ability to do 'more with less' has always given me an exceptional feeling of pride. For a small non-profit, we get a big bang for the buck, your buck. Your donations stretch a long way toward improving the quality of life for so many people who would not have access to affordable eye care if not for Enfoque Ixcán.

Because of you we continue to serve so many. Our Promise: We will never waiver from our mission.

AMIGOS TEAM TRIP ACTIVITIES COLLAGE



L-R clockwise: Lachua, Sunset, Guatemala City, Elementary school students waiting for exams, Lake Atitlan, Sweet, young girl with new glasses, (center) Antigua





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BIG NUMBERS

Your donations have now funded:

*1110 medical procedures and eye surgeries, including 789 cataract surgeries!

*10,300 people are now seeing better with the eyeglasses we have dispensed!

* Numerous free sunglasses dispensed for eye protection.



You have made life healthier and happier for many individuals and their families.

THANK YOU!

