FOCUSING ON IXCÁN

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

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SUSTAINING SUSTAINABILITY

by Scott Pike

Enfoque Ixcán, with 27 years under its belt, is showing the sustainability we had hope for from the beginning. Our vision has always been to make basic eye care accessible and affordable for the people of Ixcán, Guatemala. With the amazing help of many individuals and groups, we have done that. You, our donors, have stepped up each year to provide funds for eye surgeries, glasses and to pay wages to our local eye health promoters who keep the clinic open to the public 6 days a week, year around.

As Enfoque Ixcán has grown, by adding more eye health promoters to provide our service, acquiring land for our clinic building and construction of a spacious clinic, we have made it possible to see more patients and provide more care. Staying on top of business and keeping things moving forward requires increasing on-the-scene management. We're finding, in the last couple of years, that managing a larger operation is becoming more difficult from 3,000 miles away.

This year we may have found a solution to this problem. Last month Dwight Fleck, our treasurer, and I made a special trip to Guatemala to begin talks with Visualiza. You may recall that Visualiza is the eye care organization where we send patients needing more professional care than our eye health promoters are trained to perform, like eye surgeries.

We have worked with Visualiza for more than 22 years and they have treated nearly one thousand of our eye surgery patients. They have also graciously offered training for our eye health promoters and have been there for us when we needed advice and support. We are now talking with them about taking over the management of our clinic. To that end, they graciously sent two of their clinic managers who accompanied us to Ixcán to view our clinic operation. Visualiza already has 13 social service eye clinics in Guatemala, so they understand the needs of the rural indigenous Mayan population and provide eye care at break even fees.

Herberth & Alejandro, Visualiza clinic managers

We're working to bring our sustainable model of operation to a new level of sustainability by providing an increase in the quantity, quality and accessibility of affordable eye care services.

As our negotiations with Visualiza move forward I will keep you informed of our progress.

IN THIS ISSUE

* Sustaining Sustainability
* The Daily Commute
* Grants Awarded
* Resiliency
* Pacific University Award

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SCAN ME

ENFOQUE IXCÁN

THE DAILY COMMUTE IN IXCÁN

by Scott Pike

On our February trip to Ixcán we stayed in a village about 15 miles from the Enfoque Ixcán clinic. This is a story about our early morning commute.

The bus to Playa Grande leaves in the dark, 6 am. We stood at the side of the road at the bottom of the hill waiting for the van to arrive, Pedro, Joene and I. We chatted a bit, as I struggled to get my Spanish words in line for the day. It was a relief to have Pedro with us. He and I have been friends for 28 years. He understands my Spanish better than most.

A pair of headlights came around the corner, up the hill to our left. Riding these vans in the early morning can be a challenge. Will I get the front seat, or at least a seat with enough leg room for my stiff knees and big feet? The van stops. Encarnacion, the driver, jumps our and comes around to open the side door. All the seats are full. He tells Pedro there is only room for 2. My heart skips a couple of beats. Who's going to be left behind? Pedro volunteers. I object. Encarnacion, sensing the tension, says, "We'll find a way."

My experience with riding public transportation vans in Ixcán has convinced me that "there's always room for one more." Joene got the coveted front seat. I lost sight of Pedro in the confusion and the dark, as Encarnacion gestured me into the seat next to the door, or should I say the sliver of what was a seat several passengers ago.

I climbed aboard as everyone in my row shifted a couple of inches to the left. But, it was still too tight to get the door shut. In unison, we all exhaled at the same time and the door slid closed, moving my shirt sleeve and right arm with it.

"Where's Pedro?" I called out in alarm. "Estoy aqui," came his reply from behind me. I think he was standing, but I was unable to turn and look. Off we went. On my right, the solid metal door pressed tight. On my left, was a large and very soft woman, with arms the size of my thighs. I couldn't move. My legs and feet were wedged into the base of the front seat, where Joene sat in enviable comfort.

As the van, now carrying 19 drowsy people, bounced along the pothole filled, hard packed dirt road, we all moved in unison; we had no choice. By the time we got to La Viente, the half-way-there village, I don't know if I was getting used to the ride or maybe going numb, but being trapped between a hard metal door and a soft human being was becoming the new normal.

When the van stopped, my mind was exhilarated by the thought that someone was getting out. Then came the fear that another passenger might be joining us. ("There's always room for one more"). The lady next to me wanted out! I was thrilled, until I realized that she only wanted to change places with me for the rest of the 50 minute journey in this tuna can. I never understood if she made this change for her comfort or for mine, but the re-aligning of bodily pressures was pleasant, for a while.

Now, the softness was on my right and the bony arm of a young guy in his twenties propped me up on the left. My knees were closer now to my chin with my feet on the 6 inch high abutment that separated the back floor of the van from the front. My backpack was still secure in my lap with my arms encircling it like bark on a tree.

It was nice to have a new posture, and that didn't change for the last 20 minutes of our trip.

Continued on page 3

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As we pulled into Playa Grande I was giddy at the thought of getting out of this crazy overstuffed breadbox and stretching my legs. The door slid open and fresh, cool air rushed in. I was ready to leap out and rejoice. Suddenly, it became apparent that my left knee was locked at a 90 degree angle and my right leg was numb. If I made my move through the door, I would end up in a fetal position on the street. Wisely, but to the annoyance of those behind me, I slowly uncoiled and eased my way to out the door.

I stood for a few seconds leaning against the van while Joene and Pedro waited patiently. Then we were off, walking briskly to breakfast, well, as briskly as my cramped up, old legs would carry me. For everyone else on the van, it was just the beginning of another average day in Ixcán.

GRANTS AWARDED

In May, Enfoque Ixcán was awarded 2 grants, one from Alcon Pharmaceuticals and the other from Johnson and Johnson. The total of the 2 grants is $16,000! What a boost for the people of Ixcán.

The majority of the grant money is for cataract surgeries and training for our eye health promoters. It comes at an opportune time as we have a mission trip with Amigos Eye Care, students from Pacific University College of Optometry, in early August. Normally on these trip many cataracts are diagnosed. That means we'll be able to provide care for these newly identified patients immediately. A huge thanks to Alcon and Johnson and Johnson.

RESILIENCY

by Scott Pike

In February of 1982, the Guatemalan military started its scorched earth campaign against guerrilla resistance fighters in Ixcán. They methodically moved from village to village indiscriminately killing villagers to instill fear into the hearts of a mostly indigenous population and to crush any thoughts of aiding guerilla fighters taking refuge in the jungle.

Maria was just 16 years old and 9 months pregnant. Her baby girl was born only 4 days before the soldiers came to her village of San Jose La Viente. Many people were brutally killed. Others, among them Maria and her baby, fled to the jungle to hide. After a few days of meager existence, Maria's group was captured and taken to a prison camp where they were tortured and where many more died, eventually even her baby daughter passed.

This was a dark time in Guatemalan history. Half the population of Ixcán was able to flee to safety in Mexico, some only after eluding the soldiers in the jungle for several months. Maria was in the other half who were captured and stayed under Guatemalan military domination for 12 years.

Maria was resilient. She survived hardships during those times which are very difficult to imagine, little and poor-quality food, almost no health care, a lack of educational opportunities, and always under the control of the soldiers. She didn't give up hope. She dreamed of a return to a life of freedom. That time came in 1996 when peace accords were signed and the people were able to return to their land and homes and they begin to rebuild their lives.

Maria had 4 or 5 more children, who now live in her community of Santa Maria Tzejá, other Ixcán villages and even one son in California. These days she helps to raise 3 of her junior high age granddaughters who live with her. Maria is active in her community's women's group. She spoke with us over breakfast, while her granddaughters helped to prepare our food and get ready for school. Maria is making sure they have a life free from violence and full of love.

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I'm telling you this story of Maria, not because it is dramatic or unusual, but because in the Ixcán it's actually quite common. Just about everyone in Ixcán who lived through the violence of the 1980's has a similar family story. The poverty in this area largely stems from this history. The people were poor to begin with, but the military assaults of the 80's resulted in homes being burned, field crops destroyed, and villages totally razed to the ground.

With very little government support, recuperating and rebuilding has been slow. In my 28 years traveling there, I have seen progress. People like Maria have the strength and resiliency to keep moving forward with their dreams of a better life for their children. Providing services, like basic eye care, plays a small but significant part in rebuilding these lives and restoring hope for a brighter future.

You are making an awesome difference for these deserving people. Thank you for continuing on this journey with Enfoque Ixcán.

Scott , on the right

PACIFIC UNIVERSTIY AWARD *by Joene Pike*

At the Pacific University graduation ceremony in May, my husband, Scott was awarded the *Kamelia Massih Prize for a Distinguished Optometrist* which honors a College of Optometry alum who has made a significant impact on the profession.
Scott was told in advance to prepare a short speech for both the optometry student graduation and one for the larger professional graduation ceremony. Seated on stage with other award winners, Scott reviewed the optometry program and was shocked to discover he was the keynote speaker!! I was in attendance, and he gave a wonderful, short "talk" aimed directly at the graduating students, providing humor and wisdom learned through his experiences of a more than five decade career. Part of the fun seeing him make his presentation was that six of the graduating students had gone to Guatemala with us the previous year. What a guy, my hero! I'm so proud of him, his accomplishments and for being an all-around kind, caring person.