FOCUSING ON IXCÁN

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

VOLUME 20 ISSUE 3 **Fall 2024**

NEW GENERATIONS OF CARING

BY DR. BRIAN ARVIDSON

For the past 20 years, I have been involved with Enfoque Ixcán as an AMIGOS alumnus and physician volunteer working behind the scenes to bring sustainable vision care to the people of Guatemala. As a very private individual, I have chosen not to be the face of the organization but rather a loyal and faithful donor of my time and resources to see the growth of our organization into a steady presence of the Ixcán region.

I have chosen to lead by example and good works having been a team member on more than 12 mission trips and serving on the Enfoque Board of Directors for the past 15 years. It wasn't until this past month with the passing of my father, Charlie Arvidson, that I realized how my leadership style was a reflection of my upbringing and how that is being passed onto a new generation.

My father, Charlie, did not have a background in eye care or even medicine; he dedicated his career to construction and project management. With that expertise he chose to donate his time and talents to positively influence our friends of the Ixcán. He accompanied Scott Pike during an annual delegation trip to the Ixcán offering assistance in planning a well and community center. Charlie was a long time consultant on our capital project of building our clinic in Playa Grande, reviewing the architectural designs and offering his expertise on the replacement of a retaining wall. He generously gave the gift of time during his life and now the gift of financial support after his death.

Brian with his son and nephew

The importance of giving time has been passed down to me and now his grandkids.

In August my son and nephew joined me on our August mission trip to the Ixcán. With no medical or vision experience, they rolled up their sleeves to join me, Dr. Staci Collison, and eight Amigos students to provide three long clinic days in hot, humid conditions. We worked with our local Eye Health Promoters (EHP) to exam **535 patients** and dispense more than **300 pair of glasses**!

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ENFOQUE IXCÁN

Universal Languages

By Kalica Kohner

For as long as I can remember, travel and service have been my two biggest passions. Until this past August, they never had the chance to intersect. In partnership with AMIGOS EYECARE at Pacific University and Enfoque Ixcán, I had the opportunity to travel to Guatemala to provide eyecare to the people of Ixcán. I traveled in a group of eight students, two optometrists, and a couple volunteers.

The beginning of the trip had a rocky start. The travel down included many obstacles and mishaps, all of which were out of our control. However, nothing got in the way of us making it to our destination on time. When we arrived at our home base in Playa Grande, it was storming. Some would take that as a sign of bad luck, but not for me. I am from the Midwest, and storms are my favorite. It was like a little slice of home in this foreign place. To me it was a sign that we were being cleansed from our travels and we can start fresh and new. I helped move our bags into the rooms, and then stood out in the courtyard to soak it all in. Ready for anything.

This first day of clinic was very humbling to me. To be honest, I was a bit overwhelmed by the weight of it all. I had only completed one year of optometry school, and I was being trusted to look at people's eyes to determine if they were healthy, and to give a prescription. I wanted to do well, for myself, but especially for those I was seeing. It felt very much like a sink or swim situation. However, I was not completely in the deep end of the pool, as the doctors we came with supported me and all the students. With them, I was able to improve my skills and gain the confidence to keep going.

The next day, we drove a couple of hours to a small village school. When we pulled up, there were over a hundred students waiting for us to arrive. They were all smiling and waving, excited to meet new people and to have their eyes checked. I will admit, I have never been the best with kids, but something about these kids seemed different. They were so happy and thankful. The community these people shared in this little village was palpable.

It was inspiring to see people with so little, actually have so much. The kindness and care between everyone there and to us touched me greatly.

AMIGOS volunteers with children outside of eye clinic.

Each kid I saw was patient with me, and they all stood so still to help me see into their eyes. They asked for pictures with us, and we even got a game of soccer going when we had a little downtime before lunch. Though we could not communicate very well with each other, we shared laughs and smiles, and that language is universal. The school presented each of us with diplomas for our work. That was a surprise!

AMIGOS volunteers holding the diplomas presented by the local students.

Our last clinic day was back in Playa Grande. This day, I had a couple of hard cases.

One man had been hunting, and his gun backfired.

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Enfoque Ixcán

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The Next Generation of Caring: 2024 August AMIGOS student delegation with volunteer mentor Dr. Brian Arvidson

Marina, from Las Brisas, goes to the Enfoque Ixcán clinic for eye exams and glasses. "*Being able to come here is important because if we go to a private clinic it would cost a lot of money. I'm thankful for this service and I hope you continue to be here for us,"* she explained.

Armenio, from Carolina, likes to read the Bible. "*When my vision got worse, I couldn't do it," he lamented. "With my new glasses I'm happy that I can read again. Most of the time it's difficult for us to have money, so these less expensive prices for glasses help us manage to survive."*

Ana Maria, from Ingenieros: "*When I was having problems with my vision, I came to Enfoque Ixcán and Felipe explained to me that I had cataracts. He arranged for me to have surgery and it was a good idea. I see very well now. He also told one of my older neighbors about it. She was nearly blind. After her surgeries she was very grateful to me for the advice."*

Quotes recorded by a Guatemalan journalist, Regina Perez, about patients' experiences with Enfoque Ixcán.

Impacts of Eye Health

When blindness occurs due to cataracts, the patient often needs a full time caregiver, taking yet another family member from useful employment. At worse, the blind patient is marginalized from their family and society and has a significantly decreased lifespan. Sight restoring cataract surgery not only changes the patient's life, it changes the lives of all the people around them. Their entire community sees improvements.

New Generations of Caring *continued from page 1*

The timing of our trip couldn't be better this year as we also got to examine 15 patients who had surgeries the week before in San Benito saving them the burden of the 6-8 hour bus ride back to the Petén for their follow-up appointments. It was a gratifying time to see the results of our collaboration with Visualiza in the literal "flesh," or lack thereof, because all these patients had undergone the vision restoring cataract surgery, which involves the removal of their opaque natural lens and replacement with a clear artificial intraocular lens.

This group of patients also resulted in something else that was truly amazing. This group of surgeries helped nudge us closer to a **milestone 1,000 cataract surgeries funded by individuals such as yourself,** our many loyal donors! Through this simple but life altering surgery, the restoration of vision has provided independence, dignity and hope to our patients over the past 20+ years!

A special thank you to all those involved in this year's mission from our Guatemalan colleagues: Carlos, Felipe, Roxanna, Pedro and our translator, Julio Ambrosio! Our future optometrists, AMIGOS representatives: Kalica Kohner, Allison Wilkes, Ryan Klaich, Claire Owen, Chandler Kauffman, Sierra Fenicle, Hannah Stearman and Fiona Chui. My family: Austin and Braylon and especially Dr. Staci Collison. I would not have survived without her!

Happy to have new glasses!

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Universal Languages *continued from page 2*

The bullet exploded, and he got some small metal fragments in his eye. After the accident, he had gone to the hospital and they removed a large metal fragment. Upon our examination, we were able to see smaller fragments scattered throughout the surface of his eye and prescribe drops that would help speed his healing.

Another case was with a boy about 12 years old. I remembered examining him on our first day of clinic. His glasses prescription was drastically different in each eye. This combination made it incredibly difficult to find him a pair of glasses from our inventory. Unfortunately, with the craziness of our first day, and the language barrier, the boy and his mother left with out us finding a positive solution.

Happily, they came back on our last day of clinic! I had better access to a translator, and I found out that the boy was involved in a motorcycle accident with head trauma, and that is what caused the difference in the prescription between his two eyes. Even though we did not have a pair of glasses with us to fit his prescription, he was able to pick out a frame and we ordered custom glasses at a reduced cost to him.

Watching that mom fight for her son and seeing the relief on her face when we were able to do more for him the second day taught me a lesson I will never forget—***The love we have for family is the same no matter our circumstances or where we live.***

Everywhere we go, we will face obstacles. Our world is not perfect, and neither are we. We never know who we will encounter or how we will impact those around us. I'm proud we had a positive impact on the people we were able to help in the Ixcán. I'm a better person for it.

Kalica is starting her second year as an optometry student at Pacific University. This was Kalica's personal story of volunteering with Enfoque Ixcán during the August '24 trip.