FOCUSING ON IXCÁN

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

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GERONIMO

BY SCOTT PIKE

My first time at Geronimo's home was in 1999, when I had first started visiting his village, Santa Maria Tzeja (SMT). Geronimo was in his late 40's then and a few years away from blinding cataracts. Now at 73, he had cataract surgery last November on his right eye.

Cataract surgery is a very successful operation, usually with excellent outcomes. However, if cataracts are left untreated for too long, the surgery becomes more difficult and the success can be less sure. Many people in Ixcán, Guatemala don't understand that and put off having the surgery. They usually don't understand the risks of waiting and don't like the idea of someone cutting on their eyes, so they wait.

In 1999 I was so impressed with Geronimo and his wife, Paula and their family that I had always wanted to return, but I could never figure out exactly who they were or where they lived. I lived with this wonderful memory of that visit.

Let me explain. Geronimo and Paula have 8 children ages 20 to 46. Two of the girls and 2 of the boys are deaf and mute. That's a pretty big disability where they live without access to special services, but that didn't keep them from being successful. They developed their own sign language so the children could communicate and learn. They became carpenters, skilled craftsmen. This is what impressed me so on my first visit to their home. At that time the village had no electricity or running water; no power tools. But, the carpentry work they turned out was mindboggling.

Geronimo and family

They have a big wooden wheel which they turn by hand to power a lathe to make tables and chairs and beds with fancy, spindly legs. They make doors and cabinets, as well. The finished products aren't what one would expect from a small village in a remote jungle.

Geronimo came to this location as a young man when SMT was founded in the early 1970's.

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ENFOQUE IXCÁN

5784 SE Lexington Dr
Hillsboro, OR 97123
503.277.9711
EnfoqueIxcan@aol.com
www.enfoqueixcan.org

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Allison Wilkes is a first-generation college student at Pacific University's College of Optometry. She is the current President of AMIGOS Eye Care, a non-profit organization at Pacific University and partner of Enfoque Ixcán. Allison is committed to expanding access to quality eye care for underserved communities. Through collaboration, education, and outreach, she strives to make eye care both accessible and impactful for all.

Outside of the classroom, Allison enjoys running, traveling to new places, and spending quality time with friends.

We welcome Allison to our Board of Directors. As a second year optometry student, she is going through the toughest semester of the optometry program. Her willingness to put forth the extra time and effort to lead Amigos and work with EI says a lot about her commitment and dedication to eye care.

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The founders came here from the other side of the mountains; a 7 day walk through forest and jungle, carving a path with machetes as the moved forward.

Life in their new home was good for about 10 years, but then a civil war broke out. Geronimo, his family, and many of the villagers fled to Mexico where they lived for 12 years. In their absence, the soldiers had destroyed all the homes, crops and animals. When they returned to SMT in the early 1990's, they had to start all over again rebuilding their homes and community. The carpentry skills Geronimo learned in Mexico, he was able to turn into a business for his family.

Times are better now. Geronimo and his family are still taking orders for furniture and turning out quality work.

Because of Enfoque Ixcán, eye care is now available for the people of the region. In fact, Enfoque Ixcán has now funded nearly 1,000 cataract surgeries. Geronimo's right eye vision is improved, although the surgery should have been done much earlier for a better outcome. He's planning to have his other cataract removed this spring, and Paula is hoping to have her cataract surgeries later this year.

Thanks to your donations, Geronimo his family and his neighbors are living longer, more comfortable lives with the benefits of access to affordable eye care.

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DEALING WITH VISION LOSS

BY SCOTT PIKE

If you've read past newsletters, you may remember Maria Elena. I've written about her before. In 2015 I sent her to the eye hospital in Guatemala City because of an unexplained and uncorrectable loss of vision. She was diagnosed with a brain tumor and had surgery to remove it 2 weeks after I saw her. This was a notable event because had the tumor grown, it would have threatened her life. Maria Elena was a very popular high school math teacher but had to stop teaching because of her vision loss. She wasn't blind, but she was and still is, significantly visually impaired.

A couple of years later I introduced her to some low vision aids, magnifying devices. At that time she was working part time in the village library. But she was not happy and soon discontinued working. I didn't recognize it then but Maria Elena was going through a mourning or adaptation period, grieving.

Imagine how you might feel if you suddenly lost most of your functional vision, lost work, inability to read, unable to recognize faces, even walking becomes a problem. While I had given her ideas and devices to cope, she wasn't excited about them. She was dealing with something deeper. She was dealing with the "new," partially sighted, person she had become. She was having to rethink her life, her purpose and how to interact with family, friends and the world.

Last month before I left her village, she and her daughter made an effort to come to see me. Her beautiful smile and blouse, and her positive attitude showed me that she had changed again, perhaps more like the very popular math teacher she was before the tumor. Maria Elena is now the full time librarian, uses her low vision aids, and she loves working with children again.

Losing one's sight is traumatic. Visiting with Maria Elena last month reminded me of how important vision is to who we are. And, she showed me that we can overcome physical setbacks, but it takes time, effort and patience.

Maria Elena and her daughter with Dr. Pike