FOCUSING ON IXCÁN

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

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AUGUST TRIP

BY SCOTT PIKE

This past August Enfoque Ixcán and Amigos Eye Care of Pacific University made their 22nd joint mission trip to Ixcán, Guatemala. This year our team consisted of 8 optometry students: Tyler Oleson, Ashley Garcia, Hannah Snow and Kristin Spielman from the class of 2027 and Julia Sveen, Lilinoe McCanna, Manreet Sekhon and Simar Sekhon from the class of 2028. Our optometrists included Scotty Morris, Amado Cabrera (from Guatemala) and Scott Pike.

We were all helped by Soraya Oneida Pascual Carroway, our team interpreter.

In our 3 days of clinics, we examined 541 people, dispensed 211 pairs of glasses. In addition, 40 patients were found to have cataracts needing surgeries. They have been referred to Visualiza, our eye surgeon partners. As impressive as those number may be, in 22 years on our Amigos trips we have examined 17,697 people and dispensed 7,886 pairs of glasses. Enfoque Ixcán and Amigos, have had a significant impact on vision and eye care in this region of Guatemala. This is a region of the country lacking other stable eye care services and distinguished by severe poverty.

After we had completed the busy days of clinics, the team was able to spend a few days enjoying some of the sights of Guatemala; a hike to a pristine lake, swimming at Semuc Champey, the Caves of Lanquin and shopping in the historic and beautiful town of Antigua.

The continued success of this project is a result of the efforts of many people, from all those who made up our team, to the wonderful women who fed us, to the van drivers who took us safely to our destinations and to all of our generous donors who keep the wheels turning.

Thank you, everyone!

Amigos with Edima and family and the cooks

Semus Champey

Amigos in the Cave

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My Return to Guatemala

By Soraya Oneida Pascual Carraway

Although I am a native Maya from Guatemala, I didn't grow up exploring the country. I lived in a small jungle town and never went far beyond it. As an adult living in Oregon, I've had the opportunity to return and truly see the beauty Guatemala has to offer. The opportunity to be a part of this Amigos Eye Care/Enfoque Ixcán mission trip was magical for me.

The love I have for Guatemala and its people only grew stronger during my time there with the optometry students and doctors. I've always dreamed of going on a mission trip like this—to help, to make a difference in people's lives, and to challenge myself as an individual. I can honestly say, this trip did all of that and more.

My heart is in Guatemala, and I wish I could share every moment I experienced. I thought I would be writing mostly about the people we served—but what surprised me most was how much joy and love I felt working alongside the Amigos optometry students.

Some of the most memorable and heart warming moments came during our clinic days—watching the hard work and determination of the students. This group was such a joy to be around. They worked tirelessly, seeing as many patients as possible, applying their years of study, and supporting each other through it all.

As an Eye Clinic manager for Pacific University, I usually see students when they're checking out patients or asking questions about patient insurance coverage. But seeing them in action in Guatemala was something else entirely. Their passion was palpable. They were focused, driven, and deeply committed to helping people who don't have regular access to eye care.

On the last day of clinic, as we approached the end of the day, I had to inform some of the waiting patients that we could no longer take anyone without a case history card. These people had already been waiting for hours. It was not something I wanted to do. But then, something special happened.
A student came up to me and asked, "Is there anything else to be done?" Jokingly, I said, "Well, there are still a few people who want to be seen." Without hesitation, the student replied, "Sure, let's make it happen."

That simple statement sparked something. Two other students took another patient. By the end of the day, we had brought our total number of patients seen in 3 days to over 540 patients. The students' determination and compassion were truly inspiring. And, everyone was seen.

Soraya, Eye Clinic manager for Pacific University

After our clinic days, we ventured into the jungles of Guatemala for some R&R, and we bonded over the work we had done and I listened to stories of how our students came to choose optometry as a career. We laughed, we ate amazingly and most of all, we had a fantastic time as we learned more about each other. I will forever hold a special place for this group. This experience was the perfect mix of service, adventure, and connection..

I will always be young at heart, and to me, this trip felt like the most incredible field trip I could have ever taken- with the most amazing people by my side.

I am grateful for this opportunity and grateful that I was invited to be a part of this team. To every optometry student, faculty, and staff member, and anyone interested—I highly recommend going on at least one Amigos trip. It's an experience that will stay with you forever.

Gracias a todos y todas.
You filled my heart.

Enfoque Ixcán

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THROUGH NEW EYES

BY KRISTEN SPIELMAN

As soon as I heard Pacific University had a club that did outreach programs in Guatemala, I knew I had to go. When I was a child, my mom went on mission trips with optometrists in Guatemala and helped hand out eyeglasses. Hearing her stories was one of the main reasons I decided to pursue optometry as a career. When I told my mom I was going with AMIGOS to Guatemala in 2025 to travel to Ixcán and do a vision clinic, I found out that Ixcán was the same area she had visited years ago with a church group. My trip was truly meant to be.

When we arrived in Ixcán, we were immediately greeted with kindness by a gatekeeper and the Catholic sisters at the small health clinic the sisters operate. On the very first day of our eye clinic, we saw more than one hundred patients. Seeing the joy spread across the patients' faces as they put on glasses was unforgettable.

The most moving experience of the trip for me happened when we visited the primary school in the remote village of Xalbal. Hundreds of children were lined up outside, waiting for us with excitement. The faculty welcomed us with a ceremony and celebration. As I stood on the stage, listening to how eagerly the children awaited their eye exams, I couldn't hold back the happy tears hidden behind my sunglasses. That moment touched my heart in a way I'll never forget, and I will always carry it with me.

That day alone, we saw over 300 children. The patient who left the biggest impression on me was a 10-year-old boy who had never had an eye exam before. He told me he often got headaches in school and struggled to see the chalkboard. At first, he was quiet and reserved, but after his exam I was able to fit him with a pair of glasses. We stepped outside, and together we watched his classmates playing soccer. As soon as he put on his glasses, his face lit up. He smiled, hugged me tightly, and his whole demeanor transformed. Suddenly he was animated, excited, and full of energy.

Kristen Spielman, Pacific University College of Optometry Class of 2027

Kristen and young patient

AMIGOS at work

In that instant, I realized how something as small as a pair of glasses could change a child's world. It was a heartwarming moment that I will cherish forever. I didn't get the chance to play soccer with him, but I know he would have beaten me. I hope that one day, when I return to Guatemala with AMIGOS, I'll see him again and hear how his life has grown brighter with clearer vision.

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THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGING

BY SCOTT PIKE

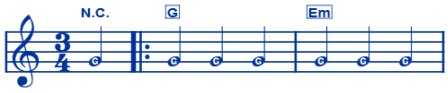
Bobby Dylan probably wasn't thinking about Ixcán, Guatemala, when he wrote that song in the '60s, but those words are plainly applicable these days.

When Pedro and I started Enfoque Ixcán in 1997, virtually everyone was poor. Most families were subsistence farmers barely able to make ends meet, struggling to keep the family fed, clothed and sheltered. In the past 30 years progress has been made. The main trading town of Playa Grande has banks, attorneys, doctors, accountants and many other signs of development.

However, poverty hasn't gone away. Some people can now afford eye care and travel to the cities for exams and glasses. The majority cannot. The majority still struggle to pay the $6 a month it costs to keep their children in school. Some families have to make the decision of which of their children should they send to school, paying for uniforms and school supplies. It's a heartbreaking decision.

In Ixcán I'm starting to see a divide between the haves and the have-nots. With Visualiza now contracted to manage our eye clinic, the costs of eye care services have gone up. Because Visualiza operates on a break even basis, their fees are low and affordable for most people, but there is still a significant population who cannot afford eye care.

Enfoque Ixcán continues to make eye care affordable by paying 25% of surgery costs, 50% of eye exams and supplying free glasses frames. That still leaves thousands of families with insufficient funds to pay for basic eye care.

We have started a special eye surgery fund to help those people who lack the resources to have the care they need to enjoy clear, comfortable vision. This fund was started with a foundation grant of $5,000 (Quail Roost Foundation). Please consider an additional donation to Enfoque Ixcán at this time to help us double our starting grant. We're aiming for $10,000.

Just as "the times they are a-changin," so too you can help change the quality of life for the people of Ixcán with your generous support.