FOCUSING ON IXCÁN

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

VOLUME 22 ISSUE 1 Spring 2026

ENFOQUE IXCÁN VISUALIZA

BY SCOTT PIKE

New name, new faces and expanded care! With Visualiza now managing the clinic for us we needed a name that better encompassed our growth.

Carla, Luisa and Nicolas are the new employees at our clinic in Ixcán. Carla is the optometrist, Luisa is the clinic manager and Nicolas is the "counselor." (*He discusses the results and treatments with the patients.*) They are a good crew and I have a lot of trust and confidence in them.

For 4 years we have been working to get permission from the municipal government to improve the road from the highway to our clinic entrance. It's only 40 meters of land, but it belongs to the local government. When it rains the road would become rutted and nearly impassible, unless by 4-wheel drive.

We explained this to Carla and Luisa on Feb. 17. By the 24 they had received permission for the improvement, and by Feb. 28 the improvements were completed! This new crew knows how to get things done. We're ready for the rainy season.

The day after I visited with them a group of 14 patients were traveling to have cataract surgeries. They were taken to the nearest Visualiza eye hospital 5 hours away.

This is how we put your donations to work, sight restoring cataract surgeries. With an optometrist, Carla, working 6 days a week, we'll be able to diagnose more cataracts and other eye problems needing treatments more accurately and efficiently.

It's gratifying to see the quality and quantity of eye care at our clinic continue to improve. We couldn't do it without YOU.

Our new road

Nicolas, Luisa and Carla

BARTOLO AND DOMINGA

Have you ever known someone who, from the moment you saw him or her, you wanted to know more about this person? I met Bartolo in 1997 when I was a part of a group of gringos visiting his village, Santa Maria, in Ixcán, Guatemala. He and his son Hugo, led us on a walking tour of his parcela (farmland).

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Scan to learn more ways to support EI through online one-time and monthly gifts.

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Your gifts make Enfoque Ixcán's work in Guatemala possible now and into the future.
We appreciate all you do for the people of the Ixcán region of Guatemala.

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A special thanks to Emiliano Panjoj and Julio Ambrosio for their support.

ENFOQUE IXCÁN

Brittney Phung is a first-generation graduate student at Pacific University's College of Optometry. She is the current president of AMIGOS Eye Care, a Pacific University nonprofit organization and partner of Enfoque Ixcán. Brittney is passionate about providing eye care to those who may otherwise not have access.

We welcome Brittney to our Board of Directors. 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.

BARTOLO AND DOMINGA CONTINUED

It was a difficult hike through the jungle, in the mud, with Hugo leading the way using his machete to clear the path of branches and vines. (Also keeping an eye out for snakes.) Suddenly the jungle opened up to a very large area which had been cleared. This is where they grew corn, beans, pineapple, cardomom and rice. They also had a few cattle grazing on a hillside.

Bartolo's farmland

It was Bartolo's stature that caught my interest. He was taller than most of his neighbors. That, and his full head of grey hair, cowboy hat, admirable posture and his clear and confident voice, made him stand out. On my yearly trips to Bartolo's village, I would often see him at church or walking around the village center visiting with friends. As my Spanish got better, I would even attempt a short conversation with him. In

Bartolo

2009, when he was 78 years old, I gave him an eye exam and found that he had significant cataracts, which were beginning interfere with his work on his farm. We arranged for him to have cataract surgeries, and his results were excellent. We made him a pair of photogrey glasses to protect his eyes from the sun's UV light.

Fast forwarding to 2 months ago when I was recently in his village, I learned that Bartolo is now 95 years old and still in good health. I was determined to visit him and his wife Dominga (age 87), to learn more about their lives. Hugo made arrangements for Joene and me to go to Bartolo and Dominga's home.

Growing up Bartolo didn't go to school. He told us, "The farm and my dad were my school." He didn't learn to read and write until he was in the military in the late 1940's and early 50's. He and Dominga married in 1956 and started a family. They had 8 children. Hugo was number 6, born in 1966.

Hearing there was land available to own in Ixcán, in 1970 he made the 3 day walk on jungle paths and over some mountains to Santa Maria to check it out. He liked it! He returned to his family and made a plan. He would go back to Santa Maria 2 or 3 more times staying for 2 months each time, to clear land and build a house. When the farm and home were ready, the whole family moved to Ixcán and started a new life.

It was a hard life, but Bartolo and Dominga were determined. Hugo told us, "I was five when we moved here and I hardly ever saw my dad. He would leave early in the morning to work on the parcela and not return until dark." Work consisted of clearing the land and planting and harvesting crops. He had no power tools, just an ax, a hoe and a machete. To grow crops he needed to clear away some of the forested jungle to be able to plant.

While Bartolo worked the parcela, Dominga took care of the house and kids; washing, cooking, cleaning, and keeping everyone healthy. Carrying water from the river for cooking, grinding corn kernels into flour for the tortillas, assigning chores for the older children. It was never ending. By the late 1970's all was going well. Then the violence of the civil war hit hard in Ixcán. When the

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BARTOLO AND DOMINGA CONTINUED

soldiers came through looking for guerrilla fighters, they massacred hundreds of people in villages throughout Ixcán. Thousands of people fled to safety in Mexico. Imagine the stress of leading your family 20 miles through the jungle on foot with soldiers in pursuit. The family remained in Mexico for 12 years before they were allowed to return peacefully to their land. The soldiers had burned all the houses and crops in Santa Maria. They also killed all the animals. On returning, families had to begin again, building, planting, and planning a new future.

Bartolo and Dominga have been back in their home in Santa Maria for 30 years. They have 25 grandchildren. The parcela they own with Hugo is flourishing. They have 35 head of cattle. Recently, Hugo created a pond where they are raising fish to sell at the market.

I asked Bartolo, "What's kept you going for 95 years." He didn't hesitate to answer. "Good nutrition. We grow our own vegetables, fruit and meat, all natural. I also love what I do and where I live. I walk a lot and have lots of friends." Aren't these the things science tells us to do in order to live a long and healthy life? Bartolo and Dominga didn't learn this, they have lived it.

Bartolo loves life! He's enjoyed being a part of his community's development. His village has grown and prospered with new schools, a new church and new businesses. Bartolo and Dominga have lived hard, productive, dangerous lives. They have a lot to show for their 70 years together and much to be proud of.

His cataract surgeries fifteen years ago didn't get him through his most difficult times, but I know his improved vision since the surgeries has made his final years more enjoyable. I believe the surgeries have extended his life.

We waved good-bye, and told them we'll visit again next year.

~BY SCOTT PIKE

Bartolo, Dominga and Hugo