In their first reporting period of 2012 our eye health promoters, Felipe and Arnulfo, have really picked up their pace in serving their neighbors in Ixcán. They examined 20% more patients through April than in 2011, or 125 people. So far this year they have taken 20 people to the ophthalmology clinic and 18 cataract surgeries have been performed. That’s double the number from this time last year. The impressive part is that those 18 cataract surgeries cost less than $3000. We’re able to stretch your donations for the benefit of many.

Our new, centralized office space has made a big difference in accessibility to eye care and as time goes on, we expect the number of people we serve to continue to grow. We hope we can continue to count on your support. In his monthly phone calls, Felipe always ends the conversation with a thank you and greetings to all our donors.

The time is right to begin the next important phase of our mission to make eye care accessible and affordable to the people of the Ixcán. Business is picking up for our eye health promoters (EHPs). We’re now sending patients for surgeries in groups of 10. We’ve funded a total of 112 eye surgeries and half of them have happened in the last 2 years. In addition to taking patients to the eye clinic for surgeries, the EHPs are on track to see 50% more people this year than last. Certainly the opening of our new office space in the economic center of Ixcán has led to this increase in business.

To continue to grow, the next step is to bring an ophthalmologist to the Ixcán 1-4 times per year to work with the EHPs. We have a volunteer ophthalmologist from Guatemala City interested in doing this work. His name is Rolando Cabrera and he’s been assisting us for 6 years now, doing training with the EHPs and aiding us with logistics of working in Guatemala. We’re ready to go to the next level of eye care.

Our goal is to raise just over $27,000 through donations and grants. The majority of this money will go toward equipment. Much of the instrumentation needed for professional eye exams is difficult to transport over the unimproved roads on public transportation, so having basic equipment available for the doctor’s use is a necessity.

We’re also planning on providing the EHPs with more training in eye care. As they get busier, they need to enhance their skills. Just as health workers in the U.S. are expected to take continuing education each year; our EHPs need to be able to expand their knowledge in the examination and treatment of eye problems.

In addition, we feel it’s time to become a Guatemalan nonprofit organization. This will allow EI to request and access more Guatemalan support. One of our mission goals has been to involve Guatemalan resources as much as possible. Being a Guatemalan organization will make that easier and more likely.

The Ixcán region’s 100,000 residents continue to live in extreme poverty and the day when a professional eye care provider will be able to make a living there is still far in the future. However, on the foundation we have built, we believe it’s now time to create a way for the people to receive affordable care with the help of Dr. Cabrera making visits 1-4 times per year. These trips will be coordinated with the work of the EHPs so that together they can offer nearly year around professional eye care.

We recognize that this is a high funding goal for an organization with a budget of around $15,000.

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From time to time I find it important to sit back and think about how Enfoque Ixcán has grown and how it happened. Our growth has been steady. At times our progress has been slowed by my shortcomings with the Spanish language, by fewer funds than we needed and by the limited time I’ve actually been able to spend in Guatemala.

But, one thing we’ve never been short on is committed volunteers, from our dedicated Board of Directors, to many friends and family, to the over 70 optometry students (Amigos) who have taken part in our mission trips. I’d like to offer a special thanks to 3 of those students who have gone out of their way to advance the mission of Enfoque Ixcán.

Joanna Plavin Carter

Joanna was an Amigos president and the student leader on the first Amigos trip to Ixcán in 2003. She not only led the trip, but she also dreamed up the idea and sold me on involving Amigos Eye Care with Enfoque Ixcán. Because of Joanna, here we are 10 years and over 6,000 patients later. She was also a member on the second Amigos trip in 2004 and graduated from Optometry school in 2005. Her “can do” spirit has lingered and inspires the project to this day.

Cristin Mattione

Cristin was a member of two Amigos trips in 2009 and 2010. She led the 2010 team. In a quiet and unassuming way Cristin added an unsurpassed degree of organization to these trips and since her participation I worry less about forgetting to pack some important item. She took care of details and left a written plan I refer to each year to be sure we’re on track. Cristin is also a former Amigos president and graduated in 2012. She continues to volunteer with Enfoque Ixcán, helping us with social media ideas.

Sara George

Sara just received her bachelor’s degree from Pacific University in May and she’s preparing to make her second trip with us to Ixcán this August. She’s applying to enter the optometry program at Pacific University. The commitment Sara has shown to Enfoque Ixcán is pretty amazing. For her senior project for graduation Sara prepared a paper and Power Point presentation called “Enfoque Ixcán: A Model for Eye Care Programs in Latin America.” This research project was based on her trip to Ixcán last year when she helped us complete an “eye care needs” survey. Sara’s Spanish language assistance, both written and verbal, has saved me several times. We look forward to working more with Sara in the coming years.

Dr. Calleja conducts an eye exam on a young patient

Spotlight: Student Volunteers

BY DR. SCOTT PIKE

The article “A Government for the People? Politics in Guatemala” was written by El Board member, Ali Durbin. Ali works with human rights issues within the international solidarity community in Guatemala. A Massachusetts native, Ali has lived in Guatemala for 11 years.

A glimpse of life in the Ixcán

EI BEGINS MAJOR FUNDRAISING CAMPAIGN CONT.

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But, it’s what needs to be done. Ninety-four percent of our budget goes directly to our program. We’re proud of that.

What we’re asking is that each of you consider helping out. Become a part of this model for eye care in the developing world. If you’ve never donated to EI, take this opportunity to make a difference. If you are a regular donor, please consider an additional donation or increasing your usual donation. We’ve come a long way over the years with your support. Now, we need a boost from you to make another significant step in the realization of our goal to help this very needy population.

You can send a check or go to our web site and click the PayPal button. Both are tax-deductible.

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A GOVERNMENT FOR THE PEOPLE? POLITICS IN GUATEMALA

Besides casting votes every four years, regular citizens in the Ixcán have very little say in what happens in their own government. Rural subsistence farmers are largely self-employed and self-reliant; they draw on their own skills, expertise, and labor to feed their families, and they use collective leadership to handle local issues. Despite their relative independence, they certainly feel the impact of national government policies, particularly in terms of social services and security issues.

Security and Violence

Guatemala’s president, Otto Pérez Molina, is a retired army general who won the presidency by promising to take a tough on crime. His version of cracking down on crime is somewhat unsettling, though since taking office this January, he has shown leniency towards drug trafficking while applying repressive tactics to non-violent resistors like farmers and youth. For instance, students protesting new educational legislation were met with tear gas and sexual aggression from police.

One of the hottest issues in Guatemala right now is natural resource use. Communities across the country have voted to protect and sustainably manage their ecosystems. Specifically, they have opposed mega projects such as open-pit mining and large-scale dam that threaten their water, land, and livelihood. In the Ixcán, 90% of the people voted against building the Xalalá dam which would have flooded dozens of communities; potential investors pulled out.

Pérez Molina responded by removing the Indigenous leaders, declaring martial law, suspending constitutional rights and sending community leaders to high-security prison without trial.

Minimal Social Services

Sometimes it seems that the government provides just enough social services to prevent massive social unrest, but not enough to transform structural inequalities. Even the largest public hospitals are woefully underfunded, and lack the most basic materials, like antibiotics. Patients have to purchase medicines at outside pharmacies, and are required to recruit their own blood donors.

One of the most popular social programs, started under the previous administration, is essentially a government hand-out: people in the poorest areas are given monthly rations of rice, pork, eggs, and other food stuffs. These types of programs are often used to reward party supporters, and ultimately fail to lift people out of poverty.

Democracy?

Two political extremes coexist in Guatemala: highly exclusive, partisan politics dominated by influence by the rich, and money; and highly participatory, town-meeting style democracy.

On the national level, the political system, though nominally democratic, is marred by corruption, cronyism, and institutional racism. The overwhelming majority of people are effectively excluded from meaningful civic participation. In one of his first actions upon taking office, Pérez Molina dealt a blow to multiculturalism and inclusion by removing the indigenous Mayan flag that had hung above the National Palace alongside the national flag.

Yet even within the flawed government, many people are working for change. The justice system in particular is increasingly applying principles of equality and fairness. Its head, Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz, is a long-time human rights defender committed to prosecuting high ranking officers accused of committing abuses during Guatemala’s armed conflict (1960-1996).

Meanwhile, in communities throughout Guatemala, collective decision-making ensures that everyone’s voice is heard. Everyone’s labor is charged to collective projects to benefit the community. Everyone’s style of leadership is pooled to run the clinics, to manage resources and protect the environment, to honor elders’ experience and raise the next generation. Leaders at the national level wishing to transform Guatemala would do well to follow these local examples of participatory democracy.

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The article “A Government for the People? Politics in Guatemala” was written by El Board member, Ali Durbin. Ali works with human rights issues within the international solidarity community in Guatemala. A Massachusetts native, Ali has lived in Guatemala for 11 years.

END OF ARTICLE ON THE IXCÁN