

EQUIPMENT DONATIONS TO EI

This spring Enfoque Ixcán received some very generous donations of eye and vision testing equipment from **Valerie Nicola at Pioneer International, Christian Berling at Heine USA and Deb Woods at Southern California College of Optometry**. The donations included ophthalmoscopes, penlights, acuity cards, a foreign body removal kit, trial lens kit and frame, occluders and a hand-held slit lamp and more. Deb Woods coordinated this effort which had a **total value of over \$3,000!** We want to thank these wonderful people for such important sustaining gifts.

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Map of Guatemala highlighting the Ixcán region



FOCUSING ON THE IXCÁN

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

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COMMUNITY OF HOPE AND RESILIENCE

The following is special guest article by Ali Durbin. Ali is a long-time friend of Enfoque Ixcán and serves on the EI Council of Electors.

I grew up in Needham, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston. When I was fourteen years old, I traveled with my father and other members of the Congregational Church to our sister community of Santa María Tzejá, Guatemala.

On that trip, my world cracked open. My mind struggled to accept new understandings of suffering and survival, while my heart expanded to admit new shapes of pain and hope.

Returning to the suburban U.S. was hard. At Needham High School, a fierce debate was underway regarding whether juniors and seniors would be allowed to park their cars in the upper lot closer to classrooms. I couldn't help but reflect on the unequal distribution

of rights and privileges in this world. A bunch of mostly white, affluent teenagers in one part of the

world were concerned about having to walk an extra five minutes to class. Meanwhile, the teenagers of Santa María Tzejá had no school past sixth grade and not even a road into town, certainly not a high school or cars, much less a high school parking lot.

I decided to learn more. I returned on subsequent delegations to the community, then spent time learning Spanish. I have now lived in Guatemala for over ten years, working on human rights issues and forming a family. In fact, for me Santa María has become more than just a "sister" community: my husband is from there!

My growing understanding of Guatemala has brought home to me the realization that, as Maya Angelou says, "We are more alike than we are unlike." Despite cultural differences, we human beings have similar needs and values. It is unconscionable that our fellow humans are denied basic goods and services, such as health care, adequate food, dignified housing, and access to education.

A Portrait of SMT

Nestled in a thick tropical forest lush with rivers and waterfalls, Santa María Tzejá is a highly organized,

predominantly indigenous community. Its pioneering settlers, seeking a way to escape the back-breaking labor on the plantations where they were compelled to work, took the courageous step of settling these remote lands in the 1970s. Through sweat and struggle, they carved out a new life of freedom and hope. In 1982, their dreams were shattered as a genocidal war devastated the region. In the years since, they have striven to rebuild their community and repair the torn social fabric of their lives.

The thousand or so inhabitants of Santa María grow most of their own food. They work hard in their fields and their homes to provide for their families.

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Ali with her husband, Edwin and daughters Chaley and Kayala

SPOTLIGHT: DR. ROLANDO CABRERA



Rolando with his wife

PLANNING FOR AUGUST TRIP TO THE IXCÁN

The August Amigos trip to the Ixcán is coming up. Nine students from the Pacific University College of Optometry, a Pacific staff person, along with optometrists Rolando Cabrera, Brian Arvidsen and Scott Pike will be visiting the Ixcán and plan to do exams at the primary school in two small villages and spend two days examining mostly adults in Cantabal. The group expects to find 40 to 50 people needing cataract surgery.



Amigos students conducting

Dr. Rolando Cabrera is an optometrist in Guatemala City, Guatemala who has added a new dimension to Enfoque Ixcán. He graduated from optometry school in 2004, but his work in the eye care field started long before that. His career since graduation is a great example of public health optometry being practiced in its purest form.

Before Rolando became Dr. Cabrera he owned an optical shop in the country's capital, Guatemala City. In Guatemala the eye care regulations are different than here in the U.S. and many opticians and optometrists practice without specialized training. As an optician, Rolando could refract patients and then prescribe glasses for them, but he wanted to offer more 'state of the art' care to his patients. He recognized the importance of monitoring his patients' ocular health. For this reason and to enhance his optical business he hired the ophthalmologist to work in his office a few days a week to examine patients.

He enrolled in a local optometry school and continued to run his optical business. He also began working at an ophthalmology clinic, called Visualiza, to compliment and enhance what he was learning in optometry school. His graduation in 2004 empowered him to practice independently of the ophthalmologist, but he continued working part time at Visualiza. Visualiza has a large social service component to the mission of their practice

which appealed to Dr. Cabrera's desire to help with the poor of his country. This included working both in the Visualiza clinic and in frequently held rural outreach clinics. He continues to help Visualiza occasionally with their outreach program.

In 2008 he offered his expertise to Enfoque Ixcán. Having a local partner in Guatemala is a great help to our program. In addition to accompanying some of the El trips to the Ixcán, Rolando is able to offer a permanent professional presence for the services we deliver. If our eye health promoters have questions, they are able to call Rolando for his advice and assistance. Occasionally our eye health promoters travel to Guatemala City for additional training. Rolando invites them into his office and helps them learn new skills. He has taken them to a local optical lab to learn about the fabrication of glasses. From time to time we need to call Rolando to help us arrange travel plans or pass on a message to our eye health promoters or help with the fabrication or delivery of eye glasses. This association between Dr. Cabrera



Rolando and Scott Pike preparing for clinic

as the local partner, and Enfoque Ixcán as the foreign partner, increases the efficiency of the care we deliver and has increased our potential for success.

There are other reasons to appreciate Rolando Cabrera. Foremost is that he's a fun person to be with: he's a gentleman, has a good sense of humor, knows some great places to eat in Guatemala City, plays the guitar and likes rock and roll music and has a beautiful family which he values deeply.

When asked why he takes time out of his office to volunteer his professional services, Dr. Cabrera simply says, "There are many poor and uneducated people in my country. I have been fortunate that I have an education and that is my gift. That means I need to give back for this gift, to let the less fortunate know someone cares about them, to lift them up and to show my own children about the responsibility we have to help our people." Dr. Cabrera is a shining example of public health optometry and social responsibility. We're fortunate that he is on our team and inspired by his values.

COMMUNITY OF HOPE AND RESILIENCE CONTINUED

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When the crops prosper, they are able to invest money in their land and their children's education. Yet when hurricanes strike, or there is not the right amount of rain and sun, or someone in the family gets sick, they end up with barely enough – sometimes not enough – money to cover the store-bought necessities: salt, sugar, soap, limestone, clothing.

People in Tzejá light candles at nighttime, haul water from natural springs, and wash their clothes at the river, since there is no electricity or running water. In this postmodern world where technology develops in staggered fashion, Santa María has no indoor plumbing, but it does have an internet center.

The people of SMT value education highly and make serious sacrifices to send their children to school. Its middle school is probably the best in the region. Most members of the older generation are illiterate, having had little to no access to formal education, but the community now boasts several college graduates.

SMT is highly organized. When a school needs to be built, a bridge fixed, or trenches dug for water pipes, everyone in the community provides volunteer labor. SMT features representative democracy at its height. Community members serve on a slew of active groups, including the Health Commit-

tee, School Committee, Community Development Council, Women's Union, Cooperative Board, Library Committee, and Potable Water Committee.

In the evenings, people stroll to the center of town: elders sit, talk, and reflect; adults conduct committee business, shopping, and personal errands; children explore and run; and teenagers gather and flirt.

When a baby is born, visitors arrive with soups and porridge; they wash diapers or cook a meal, insisting that the mother rest with her baby. When someone is sick, people share meals and haul loads of water to the home. When a community member dies, people visit with the family and watch over the body overnight before the funeral service and burial.

When other parts of the country are affected by natural disaster, folks in Tzejá rally to donate corn, beans, and other foodstuffs. When hydro-electric dams or other mega-projects threaten to displace and harm other villages, Santa María members step up with solidarity actions.

For Christmas, people celebrate with processions and tamales and fireworks. For Easter, people picnic on the riverbank and enjoy bread with honey. On Mother's Day, the children serenade their moms, and the women take part in a basketball tournament.

In Santa María, roosters crow intermittently throughout the night, while the dogs stay on high alert to keep the possums from eating the chickens. In the forest, howler monkeys shriek their presence, and *ronrón* insects drone to call down the rain.

There is no health insurance in Santa María Tzejá, nor in much of Guatemala. The public health care system is woefully underfunded, although the health promoters of SMT take impressive care of the population with the limited resources at their disposal.

People with visual impairment in Santa María generally rely on a child guide to walk with them, usually at a painstakingly slow pace due to the rough paths. As a person with myopia (about -7 in each eye), I can't imagine how I would manage to get through the day without corrective lenses. I would surely fall on my way to fetch water, grind the corn, tend the fields, or feed the pigs. The work of Enfoque Ixcán is crucial in ensuring quality of life for the folks of SMT and the region.

Daily survival is a struggle in Tzejá, yet people are quick to laughter. They approach life with joy, gratitude, and love. The people of Santa María Tzejá, who have endured war, poverty, and racism, exemplify solidarity and embody resilience.

"SMT IS HIGHLY ORGANIZED. WHEN A SCHOOL NEEDS TO BE BUILT, A BRIDGE FIXED, OR TRENCHES DUG FOR WATER PIPES, EVERYONE IN THE COMMUNITY PROVIDES VOLUNTEER LABOR."



Ali with daughter talking with school children

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