Our Eye Health Promoters (EHPs) Felipe, Arnulfo and Pedro finished up 2011 with dramatic increases in the number of people served. Here are the totals:

- People examined: 274, 34% increase over 2010
- Glasses dispensed: 229, 29% increase over 2010
- Eye surgery patients: 24, 62% increase over 2010
- Cataract surgeries: 27, 63% increase over 2010
- Other eye surgeries: 11, none in 2010

These totals are very exciting for the Board of Directors and the EHPs. They represent years of development of the project, hours of hard work for the EHPs and a sound infrastructure to continue building on. We have many very thankful and pleased patients. Felipe, Arnulfo and Pedro asked that everyone who has helped with their donations in time, money and in-kind gifts be given a gracious, “Thank you.” They realize our donations could go to so many worthwhile organizations and hope they can continue to offer eye health care to their communities in the Ixcán, with our support. The Board of Directors is very proud of the hard work and dedication of Felipe, Arnulfo and Pedro.

**The Reality of Realities**

**By Scott Pike**

February 2012—Trip Report

Having just completed my 26th trip to Guatemala, I’ve come to realize that I live in two realities. In years and visits past I remember thinking and saying to people on my return trip, “I’m going back to the real world.” That was condescending to my friends in Ixcán, Guatemala.

The first day of this trip I took a public bus to the city of Coban where our eye health promoter (EHP), Felipe, met me. We had hoped to do some shopping for storage containers for our glasses inventory at our new “office” space in Cantabal. We were unable to find in Coban what every Office Depot has in abundance, even though we had help from our wonderful Coban friends Hoang and Gustavo. RFificing here.

The next day we left for Cantabal with my 2 overstuffed bags of glasses, eye drops and testing supplies. This leg of the trip was in a 10 passenger van, re-rigged to hold 20 Guatemalans with luggage on the roof. In spite of 15 new miles of pavement, unreasonable rains kept us on the road for 4 ½ hours. We completed the 96 mile journey only once having to get out and pull the van up a muddy rain slicked hill with a rope. Felipe told me last fall when he took a group of 10 patients to the eye clinic near Coban for surgeries, the van was so crowded he had to ride on the roof with the luggage. Public transportation is different here.

Arnulfo, our other EHP met us in Cantabal (Ixcán) and we spent the next 1 ½ days unpacking and arranging the new inventory items in the “office.” (The storage containers would have to wait until I could shop in Guatemala City). We also continued our ongoing eye health care training. I taught them how and when to use a new blood pressure screener and a glucometer.

**E1 Welcomes Durbin and McCrae to the Board**

Alexandra (Ali) Durbin works with human rights issues within the international solidarity community in Guatemala. A Massachusetts native, Ali has lived in Guatemala for 11 years. She took her first trip to the Ixcán at the age of 14, hiking three hours through the rain forest to reach the K’iche’ Maya community of Santa María Tzejá.

She is a free-lance writer, translator, and editor, as well as mother to two children, Chely (born in 2006) and Kayala (born in 2009). Her husband works on human rights cases in the Guatemalan justice system.

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A VISION OF THE IXCÁN

I have a unique experience with Enfoque Ixcán because I believe I was present at the moment it started to take shape. It was 1996 and I was living in Guatemala, working with communities of refugees as they returned from Mexico and resettled in their land. Santa María Tzajá was one of the villages where I worked, and on this particular occasion Scott Pike was visiting the community with me.

We sat in the small home of Pedro Chom and asked him questions about his life. We heard about his move to the Ixcán in 1970, the beginnings of his family, their flight to Mexico when the army destroyed their village, the death of his first wife, his remarriage, and his training as a health promoter while he was a refugee. Now that they were back on their land, they were working hard to rebuild their community, and Pedro was putting his health care training to good use helping his neighbors in their remote village, an hour away from the nearest clinic.

There was a problem, though, Pedro told us. He feared he would have to quit his health care work, because he could no longer read the small print on the medicine labels. His eyesight was going.

At that time Pedro was about 45 years old, that age at which so many of us buy our first pair of reading glasses. And working most of his life outdoors in bright sunlight hadn’t helped his vision any. But he wasn’t going blind, and his reading days were not over.

Last month I was back in Santa María Tzajá and was glad to see Pedro still at work at the health post. You’ve read in this newsletter how the work of Enfoque Ixcán has grown, from training one person to training two and then three. From providing glasses to arranging for cataract surgeries and travel to get there. From working only in Santa María Tzajá to working in other communities of the Ixcán as well. The growth has been well thought out, slow and steady, always respectful of the people.

BY LINDA MCCRAE

I love the idea of supporting eye care in the Ixcán, because whenever I travel back to Guatemala I am in Santa María Tzajá, I feel like I come away with new eyes to see the world. It is a community that slowly and painstakingly has emerged from the ashes of war and violence, determined that they would rise together, that nobody would be neglected or left behind. As possibilities for improvements in the village arose, they determined that everyone should benefit.

Everyone would get a cement block house, every family would get a tank to collect rain water so that the women and girls didn’t have to carry water from the springs or creeks nearby. Fifteen cows were donated to the community, but they passed on the offspring, Heifer-project style, until every family had a cow.

As a result, the sense of the importance the treatment had on their life. As a result, the sense of the importance of the Ixcán as well. The work of Enfoque Ixcán has been a small print on the medicine labels. His eyesight was going.

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SPOTLIGHT: FOLLOW UP

We often relate stories in this column about our patients in the Ixcán. In this issue I’d like to share with you follow-up stories regarding 2 of our patients.

ELOGARIA CARNO PIORA

You may recall in our last newsletter I told about a woman named Elogaria. At age 18 she was functionally blind and had been for several years. Elogaria was a patient who, in spite of the serious nature of her problem, was a joy to be with, smiling and laughing with ease, making the best of what many of us would consider a very depressing life. She was not only living in extreme poverty without electricity or running water, but also she was disabled by multiple eye problems, one of which was early onset cataracts.

In November of 2011 we were able to send Elogaria to have cataract surgery on both eyes. The surgery was successful, however, removing the cataracts revealed a more serious problem. Elogaria has Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP), a progressive and untreatable condition. As a result, the surgery for her cataracts only improved her vision to 20/100. The good news is Elogaria and her family are quite happy with the results. She is seeing more than before. She is better able to negotiate around the home and to enjoy her surroundings and her family. This is very important to her and while the RP will continue to erode her remaining vision, Elogaria is making the most of the improved vision the surgeries have given her and she is thankful.

MAXIMO MONTENEGRO

Felipe and I were finishing up a patient examination at the health post in Santa María Tzajá when I noticed an elderly gentleman coming through the gate and across the grass to where we were. He was wearing a clean blue dress shirt with the top couple buttons open, giving him a macho look. His full head of white hair and mostly combed hair and silver glasses gave him an air of distinction. He wasn’t going blind, and his reading days were not over.

Now, here he was before us, looking fit for his 87 years, walking to the village center alone, about a mile from his home. And that mile was full of steep hills and narrow dirt paths. It’s examples like Maximo that keep us going with this project, seeing someone doing better at 87 than he was at 77, because of the benefits of modern eye care. His quality of life is better, his dignity improved, his family is happier to have him around, and he continues to be able to participate in his community with actions like coming to the health post to shake our hands and welcome our return to his village.

2011 AMIGOS students

MEXICO 2011

Maximo with Felipe

Maximo Montenegro

Maximo with Felipe

Maximo Montenegro

Pedro in 2012

Pedro in 1996

FOCUSING ON THE IXCÁN

Board Members Continued... Maureen McCrae

Maureen L. McCrae graduated from Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana with a Master’s in Psychotherapy and Faith in 2006. She has a private practice in Indianapolis working with individuals, couples and families. She has specialized in working with international adoptees who have come to the United States from China, Korea and Guatemala. She has also worked with a refugee resettlement organization in Indianapolis developing a mental wellness program and providing therapy to severely traumatized individuals from countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

In 1994 Maureen and her 5-year-old daughter traveled to Guatemala to visit her sister who was then working in the Ixcán. In addition to serving in her local church and other community organizations, Maureen serves on the Board of Trustees at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis.

New Board member, Maureen McCrae

Plans underway for August trip to the Ixcán

The AMIGOS group at the Pacific University College of Optometry has chosen its traveling team for the annual August trip to Guatemala. For their trip to Guatemala, the team and coordinate visits and clinics as an opportunity for students to have a hands on experience while helping the people of the Ixcán.

Maximo with Felipe

FOCUSING ON THE IXCÁN

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Elogaria Carno Piora

Maximo Montenegro

Elogaria Carno Piora

Pedro in 2012

Pedro in 1996

2011 AMIGOS students

Maximo Montenegro

Maureen McCrae

Pedro in 2012