

# FOCUSING ON THE IXCÁN

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

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## YESTERDAY AND TODAY

As I write this trip report I'm sitting in the Houston Airport waiting for the plane to Portland. Joene and I are returning from 2 weeks in Guatemala. Twenty-four hours ago we were in the jungle country of the Ixcán. It's a shock to my system each time I come home. Yesterday we were watching women carrying water in plastic jugs on their heads, for cooking, others were washing clothing in rivers. Today we're watching women discuss the best perfume choice at an airport store. Yesterday we were watching 150 pound men carry 100+ pound loads of firewood on their backs. Today we're watching overweight men fighting on a TV ad for a reality show about tow trucks. I'm left wondering, what's important in life?

Life in the Ixcán is about survival. Carrying water and wood from the jungle for food preparation, growing most of the food for family needs, and doing one's best to avoid injuries and disease because the nearest doctor is hours away by unpredictable public transportation, are examples of daily life for this region of Guatemala. Yesterday, we provided glasses to middle-aged and older women, so they could learn to read, today we read in the newspapers in the USA about a millionaire TV ce-

lebrity's personal problems. Last week we provided enough funds to a Guatemalan clinic for 50 cataract surgeries (\$2,000). Today I remember that one cataract surgery in the USA costs as much as \$3700.

A pair of glasses can allow someone to see more comfortably and be more productive in school and work. Last week we took over 300 pair of glasses to our 3 eye health promoters in the Ixcán at a cost of under \$500. While we were in the Ixcán we saw only 17 patients, but these were 17 learning opportunities for our eye health providers who will now be better able to serve over 250 more people in the next 12 months by dispensing glasses to improve the quality and productivity of their lives.

A significant eye problem in the Ixcán is a condition called a pterygium, which is a growth of tissue on the cornea, which over time can obscure the passage of light through the pupil of the eye and lead to blindness. The cause of this is multifaceted, but mainly from drying of the tissues of the eye from wind, dust, smoke and ultra-violet rays from the sun. Last week we delivered to our eye health promoters 16 dozen samples of artificial tears donated by Alcon, to help keep eyes wet and clean.

The eye health promoters now have 165 pair of sunglasses and ball caps to protect residents from the harmful rays of the sun. We can't stop the wind, smoke and dust or UV radiation, but we can help protect eyes from the detrimental effects they cause. Today I'm thinking and wondering how we can get pterygium education and protection to all of the 100,000 residents of the Ixcán.

Two days ago we saw a man who had pterygia which have grown on both eyes to a point very near the pupils. In a couple of weeks the eye health promoters will take him and 9 or 10 others to have surgeries which will either restore their sight or keep them from going blind. The new surgical clinic we're using, and the doctors there, are popular with our patients, so much so that our surgeries per year rate could increase in 2011 by as much as 300%.

When people learn about eyes and vision, they become better able to understand their visual needs and how normal eye conditions can be successfully treated, conditions like

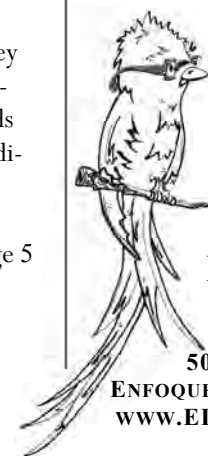
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Boy bringing a load of corn back to the village of Santa María Tzeja



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## SPOTLIGHT: HIPÓLITO OLEA, OMI

BY JOENE PIKE



Padre Hipólito Olea

The Padre with Sister Lidia,  
Scott, Pedro and Felipe

One of the priests who works in the Ixcán has been a strong supporter of our mission to provide eye care. He has talked about us when visiting the villages he serves and also mentioned us in his radio messages.

Padre Hipólito Olea (“call me EE PO”) walked up to us while talking on his cell phone, looking totally casual in a T-shirt, shorts and sandals (and at 33, quite handsome, I might add). Not the image I perceived as that of a priest, but I suspect his casual garb allows him to put people at ease in the Ixcán setting. We had arranged to meet him in the Catholic church compound, or parroquia, in Cantabal in February.

We started out our conversation with Scott teasing Hipo a little about a photo Scott had taken a few days earlier while Padre Hipo was conducting mass and the church in the village of Santa Maria Tzejá, where we were staying. Scott mentioned he had taken a photo that he felt Hipo should see, but that he was not sure he should have taken it under the circumstances and that he was convinced that it had significant meaning and should be sent to the Pope. Hipo appeared a little disconcerted by Scott’s comments and was quite curi-

ous about this mysterious photo. It turned out that Scott had snapped a picture just as the priest was swinging the “incense” burner during the mass and it happened that a “smoke ring” appeared as a “halo” (slightly askew) over Hipo’s head. It was a great shot and he roared with laughter when he saw it.

Padre Hipo is a very interesting man and besides discussing some business on the day we met, he agreed to give us a little background on his life.

He was born in Mexico City into a prosperous family. He had four siblings. In his mid teens, while he and his brother were getting their education at a boarding school in England, they were informed that their 2 ½ year old sister had died in an accident at their home in Mexico City. A propane tank located in a second story in their home, fell and burst into flames, instantly killing his tiny sister. His mother tried to save her daughter from the fire and incurred burns that put her in the hospital for a time.

Although the accident was a terrible blow to the entire family, Hipo felt that his sister was in a safe place with her maker and despite the tragedy, his faith in God grew

stronger. He returned to Mexico to be with his family and became a typical teenager, enjoying rock and roll music and a girl friend. He and some friends joined a Catholic mission group that traveled a couple of hours outside of Mexico City 1 weekend per month to serve the poor. He thought he was there to “evangelize to the poor” but discovered that the people he was “serving” actually provide him with a stronger spiritual outlook. These experiences, like his sister’s death, changed his view of life.

As the end of high school neared, his friends were studying for college prep tests. His parents hoped he would become an engineer, but he found himself feeling guilty about not wanting to go to college. To please his parents and although he hadn’t studied, he took the college tests and was accepted to 2 universities. That was all the college success he needed and he went forward focusing on his calling to a spiritual life rather than college. He gave up his girlfriend, rock ‘n roll and all the other typical teenage activities to study religion and become a priest.

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## BUILDING SUCCESS

We've always had measures for success since we started this project 14 years ago. It began like a snowball rolling down a hill. At first it was small and progress was slow. In recent years the project has picked up speed and the snowball has been getting bigger. We've noticed this with the addition of our 3rd eye health promoter, the new partnership with the Alfonso Ponce Eye Clinic and the increasing numbers of patients we see on our summer trips to the Ixcán. As the people in the Ixcán became familiar with us, our clinic numbers have increased from 400-500 patients in our week 6 years ago, to over 900 the last couple of years. As our name has become known to the people, our eye health promoters have been seeing increasing numbers of patients during the months when they are working alone.

Last year the eye health promoters were invited to go to 2 villages on their own to test eyes and dispense glasses. As a result they saw 168 more patients than in 2009. Since

2006 when we became a non-profit, our budget has increased by over 50%. And, each year our donor list grew and our donors responded to meet the challenge of each new budget.

This year the snowball gained more speed and has grown larger. During our visit in February the local public health office in the Ixcán invited our eye health promoters to make a presentation at the monthly meeting of the Board of Health, a group of about 25 health professionals who represent health care in the communities of the Ixcán. We prepared a PowerPoint slide show. The presentation went well and the Board of Health had lots of interest and questions. At the end of the meeting Enfoque Ixcán was invited to have a seat on the Board.

Serving as a member of the public health team in the Ixcán, Enfoque Ixcán has made a breakthrough and this shows how well our work is appreciated and respected in the region. Enfoque Ixcán is **the**

eye care provider in the Ixcán and is recognized as such by the area office of the Ministry of Health.

With the region's public health professionals now more familiar with Enfoque Ixcán and what we are able to offer the region in eye care, we can only expect to see our workload and needs increase as well. Our eye health promoters will be invited to test in more villages, more patients will be needing glasses, more patients will be identified for referral for surgeries, and additional educational materials will be needed in the communities and schools.

We invite you, our donors, to continue in this success. Won't you please help us stay ahead of our budget needs. Consider increasing your donation and giving your support on a monthly basis. In addition, tell your friends about us to help us increase our donor list. Our snowball has now become a glacier which feeds the eye care needs of the Ixcán region.



Drs. Scott Pike, Alfonso Ponce and Rolondo Cabrera at Dr. Ponce's clinic in Guatemala City

"The presentation went well and the Board of Health had lots of interest and questions. At the end of the meeting Enfoque Ixcán was invited to have a seat on the Board."

## EI BOARD WELCOMES DR. ARVIDSON

Dr. Brian Arvidson graduated from Pacific University College of Optometry and completed a residency at the Portland Veterans Affairs Medical Center. He has served as adjunct faculty at Pacific University, and an attending physician at the Portland VAMC. Currently, he has a full-time practice at Bend Memorial Clinic in

Bend, Oregon. Brian has traveled throughout Central and South America during undergraduate school and has been a member of the Enfoque Ixcán medical team since 2005. His first two trips to the Ixcán with Dr. Pike were as a student member of Pacific's Amigos Eye Care. Fortunately for Enfoque Ixcán he has continued to be in-

involved in our trips with Amigos, and now as a new member of the Board of Directors. His wife and two sons enthusiastically support his medical mission endeavors and hope to travel with him one day.



Dr. Brian Arvidson

## YESTERDAY AND TODAY CONTINUED...

cataracts, pterygia, presbyopia and astigmatism.

Whether the treatment is with surgery or glasses, an informed public makes better decisions about eye care. Last week we delivered 1500 brochures about eye conditions and eye health care to teachers and the public of the Ixcán, so that the services our eye health promoters provide will be better recognized and utilized. We also learned that the lesson plans presented to the schools of the Ixcán in 2009 by Priscilla Lowery as a part of an Enfoque Ixcán trip are still being used and appre-

ciated by the teachers of the Ixcán.

Yesterday we were in a home in the Ixcán eating beans, rice and tortillas and feeling satisfied. It cost us \$1.50. Today we're at an airport food court in the US choosing between pizza, Chinese, lattes, grilled Mahi Mahi and a Fudge Turtle Brownie. Those would cost us from \$4.00 to \$25.00. The Ixcán is only 3,000 miles from our home in Oregon, but our standard of living and relative wealth is a world away. At Enfoque Ixcán our goal is to make eye care accessible and

affordable to the residents of the Ixcán, and we're succeeding.

I'm still learning what's important in life, and each year, each trip to the Ixcán gives me a clearer understanding of life and what's important. So far, sight giving glasses and surgeries and the opportunities they afford, far outweigh tow truck reality shows and their like.



A young patient being examined by Dr. Scott Pike



This cataract patient enjoys his improved vision after receiving surgeries a year ago

## SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED...

In 1996 he joined the Missionary Oblates, a Catholic order and was sent on internships in the US, Guatemala and year Haiti, while pursuing his theological studies. After his initiate period he was ordained into the priesthood in Mexico City in 2007.

Although his initial choices for an assignment did not include Guatemala, his superiors felt that his background would allow him to be a positive influence in the Ixcán area. He has been in the Ixcán for 3 years now and loves the work and his assignment, except for the hot, humid weather!

We asked a few questions about life in the Ixcán, safety, education, development. He said that yes, he felt safe in Cantabal, but does not go out at night alone if it's not a necessity and commented that there is one violent death per week in the Ixcán area. He

said that the local education system was improving, but that many young people are still lured to Mexico and the US to seek the "American Dream" (read money); unfortunately, often with very negative results.

A new highway is being constructed that should bring new businesses with potential monetary improvements to the region, but most likely at a cost to the environment and exploitation of people and resources. The highway, it is feared, will do more for resource extraction from the region than for economic development of the region.

After this conversation, Padre Hipo graciously showed us some of the church compound, the beautiful church, and the residence where he resides with other priests serving the area. He also showed us some space that EI might consider renting

to have a centrally located "office" space for Felipe, Pedro and Arnulfo to store glasses and most importantly, be a central location for patient consultations.

The entire February trip was full of positive experiences and the conversation with Padre Hipo was certainly one of the trip highlights.



Village of Santa Maria Tzejá



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## 2010 IXCÁN EYE HEALTH REPORT AND CARE SUMMARY

As we look back over the past year we reflect on the many people Enfoque Ixcán has been able to help through the efforts of the Ixcán Eye Health Promoters and AMIGOS. We are proud to not only present the 2010 Eye Health Report but summarize some of the highlights from the past 14 years.

It is with the help of dedicated volunteers and gracious donors that Enfoque Ixcán has been able to make a difference in so many lives. Thank you to everyone that supports Enfoque Ixcán in their special way.

### Eye Health Care Highlights

- In 2010 the Eye Health Promoters (EHP's) conducted 198 exams. With the assistance of the AMIGOS group, EI has conducted a total of 6691 exams since 1997.
  - 163 glasses were dispensed in 2010 with a total of 3217 pair of glasses distributed since 1997.
  - A total of 403 patients have been referred for surgery over the past 14 years and of those referrals 16% have completed surgery. 20 patients received surgeries just last year.
- Of those surgeries 71 were for cataracts and 12 were Pterygium surgery. 20 cataract surgeries were performed in 2010 along with 2 Pterygium surgeries.
  - 4 patients in 2010 received Glaucoma treatment.



Dr. Scott Pike performing an eye exam with EI's new auto refractor (a donation).