

FOCUSING ON THE IXCÁN

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

VOLUME 8, ISSUE 3 FALL 2012

IXCÁN—A DAY-BY-DAY JOURNEY

BY CASSIE SOLIS

In August I traveled to the Ixcán region of Guatemala for Enfoque Ixcán and Pacific University's Amigos Eye Care. This year the trip was made up of 3 optometrists, 9 students and one volunteer. As a 4th year optometry student this was my second trip with Enfoque Ixcán and I enjoyed it just as much as my first.

Like previous years, the group gathered at our hotel in Guatemala City for the first two nights. We were able to take a trip to Lake Atitlan, which included a boat ride and a visit to one of the surrounding villages. The following day the group loaded up all of our equipment, glasses, and luggage and began the long trip to the Ixcán region.

In previous years this trip took as long as 11 or 12 hours but I was pleasantly surprised to find that more of the road had been paved since my previous trip in 2010. This year we were able to make the trip in a short 8 hours, including stops for lunch and some Sarita ice cream!

We arrived at Playa Grande with plenty of time to unload all of our equipment and head to dinner. After our traditional dinner of empanadas, beans, and homemade tortillas we were able to formulate our game plan for the following



A seemingly endless line waits for eye exams.

four days of clinic.

The first day of clinic was in town at the parroquia and we had patients lined up waiting for exams before we even left for breakfast. When we returned even more patients had lined up so we got to work quickly. We worked all day, taking shifts for lunch and finally finishing up around dinner-time.

The following two days were spent out in the villages at two local schools. We began each day performing exams on the local children and finished the day with exams for adults. Each day was similar and a little different at the same time. At the first school we were welcomed with a chorus of excited children while at the second we were greeted by a marimba band. My favorite part was while we were at the sec-

ond school we were given fresh cut coconuts from a nearby tree. The coconut water was amazing! Both schools were very hospitable and our group had a great time working with them.

The final day of clinic was back at the parroquia and was very similar to the first day of clinic with eager patients lined up waiting for our services.

In four short days, we were able to examine 888 patients. Of those 888 patients we dispensed 369 pairs of glasses. We also made 52 referrals--39 for cataracts, 10 for pterygia, and 3 for retinal problems. On the way back from Playa Grande we stopped at the eye clinic where all of our cataract referrals travel to for surgery.

Continued on page 4

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

SPOTLIGHT 2

BOARD & COUNCIL 2

A WEEK...BY CHRIS NESBIT 3

A WEEK CONTINUED 4

TRIP REPORT CONT. 4



CONTACT
ENFOQUE
IXCÁN

503.277.9711

ENFOQUEIXCAN@AOL.COM

WWW.EIGUATEMALA.ORG



Cassie Solis

SPOTLIGHT: EMILIANO PANJOJ

BY SCOTT PIKE

As we sat in the shade on a typically hot, humid day in the main trading town of the Ixcán called Cantabal, the slow, incremental growth of this remote jungle region came suddenly into focus. I was talking with Emiliano Panjoj, a young man I've known for several years and always admired. Like most of the people his age who grew up in the Ixcán, Emiliano's parents were subsistence farmers, struggling to grow food for a large family, and have a simple home, made from tree branches and a palm-thatched roof. Struggling for survival hardly describes this type of living, no doctors, no grocery stores, no telephones, no electricity, no roads, just the will to live and raise families as their people had done for hundreds of years. Five hundred years of being on the short end of a culture of dominance was all they knew. To have a piece of land of their own to farm was, and remains, a goal for most young Mayan people.

In the early 1980's Emiliano and his family fled to Mexico, along with tens of thousands of other Guatemalans, to escape the violence of a military government, which thoughtfully carried out hundreds of massacres in Ixcán. After 12 years in Mexico the refugees were allowed to return to their land. At that time Emiliano was in his teens and came back to a region which offered little opportunity for educational advancement beyond grade school.

But, Emiliano was fortunate. He lived in a community which received support from outside Guatemala and he was able to take advantage of scholarships to go to high school and the university, where he studied agronomy. He was not only a top student, but his research project received awards and was highly acclaimed by his professors.

From the most humble beginnings in a remote jungle region of Guatemala, Emiliano became the first person in his village to graduate from college. He is now well respected leader in Ixcán working as a land management planner in the mayor's office. Like many other young Ixcán Mayans, he has chosen to forego a more comfortable life in the city, to live and work where he can change and improve the future of his people. Current challenges to life and development in Ixcán include the presence of narco-traffickers sending drugs north to the USA, the influence of a renewed presence of soldiers to counter the narcos (due to the Ixcán's recent history with the military, many people are uncomfortable and untrusting of them). Challenges more closely related to Emiliano's work are major corporations entering the region to buy up land and extract resources for use in the more developed world, leaving the small farmers with a pocket full of money for the present, but nothing for the future. The main reason the

Mayan peasants, like Emiliano's family, came to Ixcán was to have their own land and escape a life of serving exploitive plantation owners.

But Emiliano hadn't come to talk to me about his challenges. In his quiet and thoughtful manner he had come to thank me for the work of Enfoque Ixcán. "The work Enfoque Ixcán is doing for my people, with glasses and eye surgeries, is very important," he said. "You give them hope, not only with improved vision for school and work, but also you show them that there are people in the world who do care and want to help. Enfoque Ixcán helps us with our dignity."

Emiliano came to ask how he could help Enfoque Ixcán. As a leader in the mayor's office he wondered if there were ways he could include us as they begin work on next year's budget. He wanted data on our work and photos he could use to present a case for our project. The world is changing, and in Ixcán, forward thinkers like Emiliano are setting the stage for a people long trapped in repression, servitude, and dominance to become equal partners in the development of their future. He is a man with a vision and is an asset to his community and country.

"THE WORK ENFOQUE IXCÁN IS DOING FOR MY PEOPLE, WITH GLASSES AND EYE SURGERIES, IS VERY IMPORTANT," HE SAID. "YOU GIVE THEM HOPE, NOT ONLY WITH IMPROVED VISION FOR SCHOOL AND WORK, BUT ALSO YOU SHOW THEM THAT THERE ARE PEOPLE IN THE WORLD WHO DO CARE AND WANT TO HELP. ENFOQUE IXCÁN HELPS US WITH OUR DIGNITY."

~ EMILIANO PANJOJ



Emiliano Panjoj

ENFOQUE IXCÁN BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Dr. Scott Pike, president
Dwight Fleck, treasurer
Amanda Terhes, secretary
Dr. Brian Arvidson, member
Ali Durbin, member
Maureen McCrae, member

COUNCIL OF ELECTORS

J. Eric Anderson
Suzanne McCann
James Harrison Pike II
Joene Pike
Connie Running
Dr. Ronald Craig Stout

A WEEK CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE BY CHRIS NESBIT

They say one short week can change your life. For me, one week solidified and reaffirmed a choice I made several years ago when I stood at a crossroads in my career and my faith.

I graduated college with a bachelor degree in computer science. I got a great paying job with generous benefits straight out of school working in IT at a mid-sized financial institution. I lived in sunny southern California, within walking distance of the beach. I drove a BMW. In 2008, I walked away from it all. On several mission trips over the years to Mexico, China and Peru, I saw poverty and hopelessness firsthand. These individuals didn't need a website, or complex statistical financial analysis, or a customer information database; they needed food, clean water, eyeglasses, and basic medical care. I chose to return to school for a degree in optometry as a way to help meet this need; I specifically chose Pacific University because of the commitment and passion that I sensed in the faculty for this work. Rooted deep in my faith, I had a dream of someday forming my own non-profit and using optometry to help those less fortunate.

I spent two years in leadership with the AMIGOS Eye Care program at Pacific University, using my IT background to create the program's first website, www.amigoseyecare.com, and using my banking experience to help reorganize the program's finances. The

more I worked with the organization, the more I realized that of all the trips available, if I could participate on only one trip during my studies at Pacific University, it would have to be with Dr. Pike and Enfoque Ixcán. The story of Dr Pike's encounter with a poor farmer in Guatemala, and his subsequent formation of Enfoque Ixcán fascinated me. I learned that not only does Enfoque Ixcán provide eyeglasses through the AMIGOS Eye Care program at Pacific University, but also provides cataract and other eye surgeries for those in need. After three long years of study, I needed to reaffirm the passion in my heart that led me to change careers in the first place. So, this past spring at the urging of my loving wife and parents, I set aside my longstanding concerns of travel finances and time away from my then 9-month old son, and signed up to go to Guatemala in August. It was one of the best decisions I have ever made. The first day in country, during a long bus ride, I had the honor of peppering Dr. Pike with questions on how he came to form Enfoque Ixcán and his passion for the people of northern Guatemala, their poverty and recent history of political upheaval. I asked about logistics and in-country travel. I asked about contacting and working with local eye surgeons and provincial government health officials. I was touched by his genuine generosity and servant heart. I couldn't wait to get started.

During our first day in

clinic, I helped determine the ocular health and the glasses prescription of more patients than I could count. I diagnosed and confirmed the presence of cataracts in several patients and helped refer them for surgery. During the frenzy of the clinic day, it was hard to process the appreciation and thanks I received from all the patients, many of them elderly and with little to their name. However, later that night as I lay in bed surrounded by purple mosquito netting, I was touched deeply by the memory of their smiles and gratitude.

The next day, we drove to the rural outskirts of town to provide vision screenings to children at a local school, who in many ways represented the poorest of the poor. The children were all waiting for us as we arrived, cheering in unison with smiles the size of watermelons slices as our bus drove up to the school. We spent the entire morning evaluating the children, teachers and parents. After lunch, before we could begin packing our gear to drive to another area school, we were surprised when the eager children and teachers from the second school actually came to us! That afternoon I diagnosed a small 8-year-old boy with dense cataracts, essentially blind, his father beside himself with grief. We gave him a surgical referral to a local clinic, to be paid for through Enfoque Ixcán; I saw hope restored in the father's eyes as he thanked us profusely. I was hooked.

Continued on page 4

*The article **A Week Can Change your Life** was written by Chris Nesbit. Chris is an optometry student at Pacific University College of Optometry, class of 2013. He also volunteers his time as the web developer for AMIGOS Eye Care.*



Chris Nesbit



2012 AMIGOS that traveled to Guatemala



Return Service Requested

Nonprofit
US Postage Paid
Eugene, OR
Permit No 384

A WEEK CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE...CONTINUED

Continued from page 3

This is what I want to spend my life doing. This was my dream, the reaffirmation I so desperately needed.

My trip to Guatemala this summer relit my passion to help those less fortunate than myself. Enfoque Ixcán pro-

vided a model of how providing basic eye care in conjunction with the work of local health officials and surgeons can dramatically change lives. I witnessed how a simple pair of eyeglasses can help an elderly man continue to work and provide the only income for his family. I saw hope re-

stored in the eyes of a long-suffering father. It is unclear where I will serve in the future, in Guatemala or elsewhere, but what my time in Guatemala confirmed in my heart this summer, is that I will indeed serve. I will indeed serve.



Chris conducting an eye exam

AUGUST TRIP REPORT CONTINUED...

Continued from page 1

The clinic had been upgraded since my previous visit. The original building contained registration and exam rooms while a new, second building housed the surgery rooms and overnight accommodations.

After our visit at the eye clinic we traveled back to Guatemala City before an early morning flight that brought us back to another school year.

The trip to the Ixcán was an extraordinary time and a valuable learning experience to all involved. We had many

nights talking and laughing around the table playing cards but most importantly we saw first hand the improvement in a patient's life when we were able to fit them with a pair of glasses. The memories we made this year will stick with us forever and I, for one, can't wait until I can return.



EI Board member, Dwight Fleck, assisting AMIGOS students conduct eye exams at village school