

# FOCUSING ON THE IXCÁN

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

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## FEBRUARY VISIT TO THE IXCÁN

We had a busy week in Santa Maria (SMT) this year. The first afternoon at the Health Post we saw 10 patients, ranging from a reluctant middle schooler who would benefit from some glasses for her studying (she was having lots of headaches), to older patients needing cataract surgery. We also saw a school teacher who was barely able to read book sized print because he was in his late 40's and needed reading glasses. (His teaching is going to improve now that he can read again.)

On Tuesday of the week, we went into Cantabal, the trading center of Ixcán, to work in the Enfoque Ixcán office with Felipe and our other eye health promoter, Arnulfo, from Mayalan. In the afternoon at the office we expected 5 patients, but had to settle for 15 and nearly missed the van back to SMT. Many of these patients are now scheduled to go to San Cristobal Verapaz for surgeries. While at the office we replenished the inventory with over 100 pairs of glasses, about 75 sunglasses, and several dozen samples of artificial tears.

Earlier that day we paid a visit to the Mayor's office. Mayor Carlos agreed to have the municipality pay a portion of the surgery patients' transportation cost for the trips to San Cristo-

bal. The first trip taking advantage of this offer traveled a week later. The mayor's office is paying for one round trip for each patient. The patients themselves will pay for their follow-up visits. This contribution will help the people a great deal. Emiliano Panjoj of Santa Maria was instrumental in preparing the mayor for our request and deserves a lot of credit and our sincere thanks for this success.

Our other morning appointment in Cantabal was at the public health office. The doctor there was very complimentary about our work in Ixcán and the service of our eye health promoters. They look forward to working with Enfoque Ixcán in the future. In that vein, when we told them about our goal of building our own clinic in Playa Grande and have a place at the clinic where doctors could come to do eye surgeries so that the patients wouldn't have to travel so much, he offered us a piece of land to put the clinic on. This just about blew our socks off. It looks like the next big fund raising campaign will be for a building fund!

Near bedtime on our last night in the village I was called to one of the village tiendas (small store) to see a man with an eye injury.

Juan was on the floor squirming in pain, unable to see. As the story unfolded, we found that he got the sap from a tree in his eyes while working on his parcela (farm land) earlier in the day. I retrieved some anesthetic drops from my room and managed to get some in his eyes. In a couple of minutes he was comfortable and able to open his eyes. Much to my relief that was the reason he had been unable to see before. We applied an anti-biotic ointment to his eyes and gave him some ibuprofen that Jerry, a fellow traveler, had with him. Juan's wife made him a bed on the floor and he spent the night there.

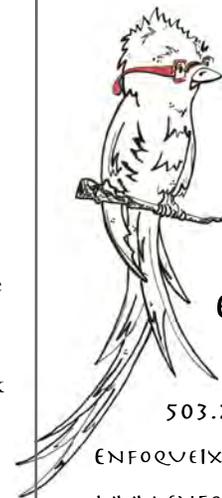
I talked with Felipe on the phone a week later and learned that Juan was much better the next day and back to normal by the second day. We were in the right place at the right time to lend a hand.

Before our trip to Ixcán we attended to some errands in Guatemala City. One important appointment was to visit an attorney to begin the process of becoming a registered non-profit organization in Guatemala. When this is completed we will be in a better position to move forward with our plan to build a clinic for the people of Ixcán.

BY SCOTT PIKE



Dr. Pike and Carlos, the mayor of the Ixcán



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## SPOTLIGHT: NATIVIDAD "NATY" CHOM SOLIS BY SCOTT PIKE

This is a success story. If you saw this story as a movie, you might think, "That was a nice story, but obviously a fantasy." This is a true story.

On my second trip to Ixcán, in 1997, I played with a cute little 4 year old named Natividad Chom Solis. Her father, Pedro, and I worked together to start Enfoque Ixcán. Five years later, Naty, then 9, accompanied her father to Guatemala City with our first group of surgery patients. While at the eye clinic I had a female ophthalmologist examine Naty's eyes. From that point on she has wanted to be a medical doctor.

Now let me give you a little background to illuminate why this is such a great success story. Naty's father was, like nearly all their neighbors, a subsistence farmer. Pedro worked hard on his farm to produce food for his family of 6. Naty is his and Teresa's youngest child. Their village schools only went through junior high. Pedro and Teresa were poor, but smart. They taught their children the importance of a good education. They were

lucky to live in a village with a regular overseas presence, which provided scholarships for students to go on to high school.

Naty watched her older brothers and sister study and win scholarships and go on to the high schools in other parts of Guatemala. With jobs, more hard work, determination and additional scholarships, she saw that they were able to attend the university. Subsistence farming did not have to be her way of life. She could be a doctor.

The competition was heavy, but Naty achieved well enough in school to also receive a high school scholarship. At age 14 she went off to live in Coban, 5 hours away, to attend high school. She lived with other girls her age, sharing an apartment, cooking, cleaning and studying. She was only able to go home twice during the school year. Fighting homesickness and the lost feeling of being on her own at a very early age, Naty used her dedication to her goal of one day being a doctor, to move forward.

Now in her 3<sup>rd</sup> year of medical training, Natividad

still struggles. The university classes are not easy. Unlike colleges in the USA, a C grade in Guatemala is thought of as a successful outcome. At the end of her second year of university Naty had this to say, *"I had some very good moments, while at other times I was disheartened or angry, but after all was said and done, I am proud to be a person who gives her all to be a good person, and before too long, a doctor who will help her people. The people of [Ixcán] mean a lot to me; they are the reason for my struggle and I don't want to let them down."*

Naty's parents are unable to offer her the money to attend college, but they support her in other ways. *"My parents help me by telling me how to confront problems and difficulties. I admire them a lot, and so in 2013 I go with spirit and determination to continue with my study of medicine."*

Over Christmas vacation while she was in her village, she helped our eye health promoter, Felipe, do vision screenings on the middle school children. She said, *"It gives me a sense of pride to be of service to my village, my people."*



Natividad Chom Solis

*"My parents help me by telling me how to confront problems and difficulties. I admire them a lot, and so in 2013 I go with spirit and determination to continue with my study of medicine."*



Welcome from Ixcán middle school students

## "SAGRADA TIERRA" – SANTA MARIA TZEJA, GUATEMALA

It is a hot, humid day in the Ixcán – a remote area in Northern Guatemala. We walk silently through the jungle following Manuel to the killing fields in his pueblo, Santa Maria Tzeja. When we reach the place of the 1982 massacre I feel awkward as well as awed as Manuel tells his story. Manuel's eyes fill with tears as he tells the story

of his family's murder by the Guatemalan military forces.

Manuel and his family were working on their parcela (farmland) some distance from the village. His small son was crying and his wife asked him to return to the village for milk and food.

Manuel and his seven year old son, Jose, ran quickly down the path to the village.

On their return they hear gun fire – they run faster towards their parcela. Then, only silence and the pitiful cries of the baby – Manuel falters in telling this story of the awful, brutal slaying of his wife, four children, his mother and two cousins.

He turns to us and asks

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The Village of Santa Maria Tzeja today

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## ENFOQUE IXCÁN EXPANDS REACH THROUGH THE WEB

After years of educating the Ixcán Eye Health Promoters and residents in the Ixcán about eye health, Enfoque Ixcán is moving forward to education others about the eye services and opportunities being offered in the Ixcán region. EI's new website highlights the eye health education and clinic activities being conducted by Enfoque Ixcán but also shares some of the wonderful and empowering success stories from the region.

The new site allows visitors to experience the culture of Guatemala by listening to "Caracol" from *Americas* by Strunz & Farah. It also spotlights the efforts made to improve eye health in the region through the partnership with the Pacific University College of Optometry AMIGOS student group.

The site is full of color pictures, stories, links to Facebook, and a portal for online donations. As a friend of EI, we hope that you will visit our new site regularly. We look forward to sharing more stories of success and hope with you as EI continues to grow.

**ENFOQUEIXCAN.ORG**



Screen shot of new EI website—enfoqueixcan.org



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## “SAGRADA TIERRA” CONTINUED

BY PAT RUMER

*Continued from page 2*

why were they killed? We are humbled by this simple, direct question about a tragic period in Guatemala’s long history of violence and death. Manuel and other villagers are Kech’i speaking indigenous Guatemalans who moved to the Ixcán in the early 1970’s with the support of their Spanish priest, Father Luis Gurriaran. They travelled a long distance to find land as the mountainous plateau home, the altiplano, was overcrowded and there was no more land.

The SMT villagers formed an agricultural cooperative, built simple homes, a church and a school. They had heard that there were armed battles in their area between guerrilla forces and the military, but

they were not part of either struggle. They just wanted to farm their land, feed their family and hopefully, educate their children.

Who knows why Manuel’s family was killed? Certainly, it was part of the 1982-83 Rios Montt “scorched earth” policy to root out the guerrillas and protect the civilian population. This policy of “frijoles y fusiles” meant that if villagers joined the government, they were given beans, if they opposed the government and the military, they were killed. Very simple – join us or be killed.

Manuel did not know why their village was singled out – was it because of their progressive priest, Father Luis, or the trained catechists who had studied the Bible from a

liberating perspective or the fact that their cooperative had capable leaders? The scorched earth policy targeted catechists, teachers, agricultural cooperative leaders, health workers – in fact anyone who could and did educate and organize the community.

“War is not the answer,” Manuel tells us. “The Guatemalan civil war brought us only dolor, pobreza y miseria (pain, poverty and misery) – people think that nothing will happen in a war, but that is not true.” Manuel fled Guatemala for Mexico where he and his [remaining] family lived until their return in 1994.

His story moves me to tears as we stand in this sacred place – I cry for the terrible losses that Manuel and so many other Guatemalans suffered.



Tzeja River near the village of SMT

INDEED, THIS STORY, SO WELL TOLD BY PAT RUMER, IS A COMMON STORY IN IXCÁN, GUATEMALA, WHERE OVER 300 MASSACRES TOOK PLACE DURING THE VIOLENCE OF THE 1980’S. MUCH OF THE POVERTY AND HARDSHIP THESE PEOPLE LIVE WITH TODAY IS A RESULT OF THE TERRIBLE THINGS THAT HAPPENED 30 YEARS AGO.