GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE….BUILDING BRIDGES OF ACCESS
By Dwight Fleck, Board Member

Think of a bridge you know well and perhaps frequently travel over. Now, think what it would be like without that bridge. Getting from where you are to where you want to be would most likely vary from very inconvenient to very difficult to do. Now, think what it would be like if you had no option other than that bridge. That is not a pleasant thought as where we want to be is important to us. Fortunately, for us in the U. S. there are almost always options to enable us to have access to what we want.

Not so with the people of the remote Ixcán jungle region of Guatemala. There, 100,000 people live with limited access to basically everything we in the U. S. take for granted. Be it educational opportunities, health care, economic opportunities, community infrastructure or decent roads to name a few. Just take the 1½ hour ride from Playa Grande to the village of Santa Maria Tzejá and you will quickly come to appreciate the worst road you ever traveled in the U. S. Or visit with the high school students in Coban, who after completing middle school, moved miles away from their village because there is no high school in their village. The students live with other students, but no adults, and as such need to help each other with studies, cleaning, cooking, illness, etc. These are the fortunate ones as most youth do not have access to secondary education due to lack of funds or other family reasons. Many cannot even attend middle school due to a lack of money.

The Congregational Church of Needham, Massachusetts has had a remarkable partnership with the village of Santa Maria Tzejá for 30 years during which it has, among other things, enabled access to educational opportunities for the youth of the village. The bridge they and the village built provides access to those educational opportunities that had been on the other side of the educational chasm. As a result they have seen
***** Don’t forget to go to Amazonsmile.com, select Enfoque Ixcán, so a percentage of each of your purchases supports EI’s efforts. *****

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students not only able to attend high school but also become university graduates. And, as bridges enable two way access, the village has benefited from those who have gained the educational access to a degree.

20 years ago Dr. Pike started building the Enfoque Ixcán Bridge to enable consistent access to eye care for the 100,000 residents of the Ixcán where there is no other permanent eye care. As a result of this bridge more than 15,000 eye exams and over 500 cataract and other surgeries have been provided as well as other eye care. On the flip side, that means there are somewhere around 85,000 left to traverse the bridge.

Your donation makes access to eye care happen.

SPOTLIGHT ON SUSANA

By Scott Pike, OD

It’s not unusual to see young people with their hair over their eyes, but in Susana’s case there is a compelling reason. Her right eye was disfigured by an injury and infection. For the last several years this teenager has been hiding it away. Wouldn’t you?

Not only is this a cosmetic burden for Susana to bear, but this is a very unhealthy eye which could develop more serious complications for her health.

In Ixcán, Guatemala, professional eye care is very inaccessible. Without a doctor nearby and without money to travel the 4 hours to a doctor, patients like Susana live with the hardships life gives them. Our eye health promoter, Felipe, found Susana and though we could help her.

Thanks to wonderfully generous donors, like you, Enfoque Ixcán will help Susana. She is scheduled to see the doctors at in Guatemala City where she will have her right eye removed and replaced with a prosthetic eye. She will no longer have to hide behind her hair.
“HOW’S THE NEW EYE CLINIC COMING ALONG?”

By Scott Pike, OD

We stood alongside the border of our new property in Ixcán gazing in toward the middle. This is where we plan to build an eye clinic for the people of Ixcán. The jungle here is so thick, seeing in more than 3-4 feet is impossible. Never-the-less, it was rewarding to know and see that we finally have a place to build.

It’s been nearly 4 years since we started planning to build our Ixcán eye clinic. We had the necessary permission to build on the land where the new hospital is being built. You came through with the donations necessary to construct our clinic. We were ready. Then ‘Guatemala time’ took over. The new hospital, expected to be completed in 2015, is still incomplete and our building site remains a mud hole.

To keep things moving along, last June we successfully petitioned the mayor of Ixcán and his counsel to donate a piece of land to us for our clinic. The land they have granted us is huge, giving us the ability to expand our building as we grow into the future. However, as you can see from the photos this land is currently a dense piece of jungle. I don’t think one could make a path across its 70 meters without having to stop half way to re-sharpen his/her machete.

So, we have our own land. This month we’re having it surveyed. Our architect is making a blueprint. We are making incremental progress and that’s exciting! Next, the municipality of Ixcán is supposed to construct a new road along the east side of our property, to improve the access. We currently have access on the west side.

Most importantly, the board of directors of Enfoque Ixcán will use this year to re-double our fundraising efforts. Clearing the land, making provisions for water, sewer and electricity, and providing for security will require an additional $10,000.

I am frequently asked, “How’s the new eye clinic coming along?” I can now confidently say that we’re getting there. It won’t be too much longer and it will be worth the wait. You will all be invited to the grand opening. Keep your 2018 calendar clear!
In 2016 you, through Enfoque Ixcán, continued to offer affordable vision and eye health care to the people of Ixcán. Our eye health promoters Felipe Panjoj, Arnulfo Mejia and Pedro Chom worked hard to provide the Ixcán region with basic, quality eye care.

Because of your generous donations our eye health promoters accomplished the following:

Total number of people examined --350  Total eye glasses dispensed—143

In August, with the help of my optometry students (Amigos), many more people were examined and helped:

Total people examined—1,090  Total eye glasses dispensed—556

In addition, your support allowed 121 people to travel for surgeries and other professional eye care to our professional referral resource, Visualiza, in San Benito, Petén. You funded 66 cataract surgeries and 10 other eye surgeries at Visualiza. The funding included these patients’ travel and lodging for a total of 8 trips to San Benito.
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Also in 2016:

~Enfoque Ixcán was granted approval by the Guatemalan government as a non-profit organization in Guatemala. Our legal representative is Pedro Chom.

~Enfoque Ixcán signed an agreement with the municipal government for a piece of land where we will build a permanent clinic for our eye health promoters to work.

Since Enfoque Ixcán began its work, your donations have opened the doors for over 15,000 people to have eye exams and 7,200 pairs of glasses have been dispensed, and you have funded 518 eye surgeries to cure blindness in Ixcán.

Enfoque Ixcán is deeply grateful to you for your awesome support. Our service to Ixcán for the last 20 years has brought joy, dignity and a higher quality of life to our neighbors in Ixcán. We hope you will help us continue to serve the people of Ixcán for many years to come.

THE MEDICINE GROWS IN THE PATIO OF THE HOUSE
by Lisette Romig

This is an abridged version. To see the full version including reference sources, go to the link in the online version of this newsletter.

In August 2016, I travelled with Dr. Pike and a group of optometry students and several optometrists to the Ixcán region of Guatemala. I’d made the same trip in 2010. I was excited to go back to see the changes in the community.

My focus was to help where I could; to translate, practice Spanish, and learn about alternative healing practices. I am interested in cultural competency in health care. It is important for all health care providers to know the cultural background of their patients as it relates to their health.

While taking patient histories during our clinic days, I would ask the patient if they have used plants and herbs to treat their ailments. The answer was often yes. I heard about a variety of plants that were used to treat diseases. One man used garlic to lower his blood pressure. Another man used the bark of a tree made into a tea to treat diabetes. Common plants used to treat eye related illnesses are compresses soaked in tea made with calendula, chamomile and eufrasia (eyebright) for red and sore eyes and witch-hazel for irritations of the cornea.

The role of health care promoters, such as Felipe and Arnulfo who work for Enfoque Ixcán, in these rural areas is of critical importance. The health promoters, who have been trained to diagnose diseases and to help with the logistics to get
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the patient to the specialist or clinic where they can receive treatment are the bridge between modern medicine and traditional beliefs. They are highly regarded in the small rural communities and have earned the trust of the people. While we were visiting the Visualiza clinic in Guatemala City, Carlos, the outreach director, gave us an example of the importance of health promoters and how patients in rural communities will not seek treatment if they don’t trust the doctor. Often when they go into a new community to diagnose cataracts and refer patients for surgery, the patients will not go, because they believe their cataracts are caused by bad spirits. It takes a lot of counseling and working with local health promoters to convince a patient to undergo the surgery. Once one patient returns to the community with clear vision, others will follow.

It was a pleasure to work with the health promoters of Enfoque Ixcán, Felipe and Arnulfo. After learning more about traditional healing and the Mayan culture, I have a renewed appreciation of the important role they play in the eye health of the people in the Ixcán.

Plants with medicinal properties