

# FOCUSING ON THE IXCÁN

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

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## SIGHT IS A GIFT

*Kathy Snider is a lay missionary, working in the Ixcán region of Guatemala since 1998. She is co-founder and executive director of Ixcán Ministries, a non-profit organization based out of Mandan, ND. and the village of Santiago Ixcán, Guatemala.*

“Katy, I have a problem,” he said. “It’s my eyes. I can no longer see the words in order to read.” I’ve heard this complaint before, many times, and it is a problem. This time Lazaro Morales, a faith leader in our local church who leads prayer services, was struggling to see. “You need glasses,” I said. “There is an eye program – Enfoque Ixcán – that helps people with eye exams, glasses, and if need be, surgery. They will be coming to the Parroquia in Playa Grande for a few days in August. Go there and get your eyes checked. They will be able to help you,” I informed. He nodded.

I hope he goes.

I live in the Ixcán jungle one of the most under-served areas of Guatemala. Eye care is no exception. There, the indigenous Maya, forge a living from the land growing corn, beans and cardamom. Their lives are simple and labor intensive – cooking is done over open fires or wood stoves. Some are artisans – weavers and jewelry makers

– others catechists – faith leaders who lead prayer services and who proclaim the Word – some are students. They all need good eyes to do the fine, close up work that their art and reading requires. Many of them are aging and no longer see well. Moreover, the long years of cooking over fire and smoke has taken its toll on eyes. Enter Enfoque Ixcán.

I learned about Dr. Scott Pike and his work a few years ago via his website and wrote him. I was relieved and delighted to learn about Enfoque Ixcán and Dr. Scott immediately put me in contact with Felipe Panjoj, one of the eye healthcare promoters. With Dr. Scott’s approval, Felipe and his co-worker, Arnulfo Mejia, agreed to come to my village of Santiago Ixcán and do an eye care screening visit, working out of my home. People came. Many were helped. 21 year old, Carlos Cuyuch, was one of them.

Carlos started school late in life. At 18 he had managed to reach the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, but never graduated from the 6<sup>th</sup>. The problem – his eyes. He couldn’t see the letters in order to read, in addition to the redness and irritation that he constantly experienced. He was forced to quit school and began to work full-time in

the fields.

Even so, Carlos’s red and painful eyes continued to bother him. He went to a doctor in Playa Grande and he prescribed eye medications that took the pain away for a few hours or so but would then return. The pain got so bad that Carlos didn’t want to work.

Then one day he heard that Felipe was in Santiago Ixcán. Carlos walked the long hill up to my house hoping for an answer. “*Tú ojo está bien grave*,” “Your eye is really bad,” Felipe informed. In addition to eye redness and irritation, Carlos had a carnosidad [pterygium], a growth on the cornea. He would need surgery.

Some months later, Carlos was able to join a group of other eye patients from the Ixcán needing surgery. Together, along with Felipe, they traveled the 5 – 6 hours to San Cristobál, Alta Verapaz, to be operated on by a team of eye surgeons partnering with Enfoque Ixcán.

Carlos’s surgery was quick and uncomplicated. His recovery would last for days though; drops put into his eyes at 6a.m., 12p.m. and 6p.m.. Felipe was there for the patients to help in the healing process.

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BY KATHY SNIDER



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### SPOTLIGHT: DWIGHT FLECK

Frequently in my business life I start a meeting by asking “why are we here? What do we want to leave this meeting with that we do not have now?” It helps to frame the focus of the meeting and to crystallize the expected outcome. When asked to do a brief article about why I am involved with Enfoque Ixcán I had to do some more serious thinking. The quick answer is “because my buddy from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, our president Dr. Pike, asked me to.” How could I turn my buddy down? The 2<sup>nd</sup> quick answer is that it is better to give than to receive. Which is true, but I do like to receive gifts and have been known to hoard gift cards to prolong the pleasure. Beyond those quick first two answers I needed to think awhile.

On one hand, I am neither an optometrist nor an ophthalmologist so my direct contribution to the purpose of the organization is limited. Actually, it rapidly deteriorates to pretty much the sole direct thing I can do happens when I occasionally accompany Dr. Pike on a trip to Guatemala. When the patients in the August trip are

being examined I help by pointing out the symbols on the eye chart. As many of the older patients cannot read or write I point to a symbol and wait to see if they hold 4 fingers up – down – or sideways. That direct contribution I can make.

On another hand, I am neither a CPA nor even a graduate in accounting. But, I do like numbers and uncovering their meanings. So, as Treasurer, I am able to contribute my skill with numbers. Balancing the books can at times be my version of a popular video game. I also can offer up a thought or two at board meetings. But that rapidly turns the discussion around to the benefits I receive from participation in Enfoque Ixcán.

I have always been interested in the countries and peoples of the world. As a youth I had my bedroom walls covered with maps of places I had never been to but seemed intriguing. Guatemala is one of those places that fulfill my long held dream of visiting a foreign land and becoming acquainted with people whose life experiences are very different

than mine.

Most important, however, are my experiences with the people of Guatemala. In particular, the people of the Ixcán are warm, friendly, hard-working, positive, and personable. Their enduring spirit is an encouragement to me in my daily life. Meeting and getting to know the people of the Ixcán region reminds me that we all share that common bond but have different life experiences and views of the world around us. The truism that travel and becoming familiar with others is broadening is a truism because it is true. And doing so as part of an organization with a laudable purpose and mission is even more rewarding. From the people of the Ixcán to the local eye health providers we directly support to the Guatemala professional eye care providers to the Rotary Club of Guatemala to the others who support Enfoque Ixcán; I benefit by an enriched experience and am encouraged.

When it comes to balancing the books, in answer to the question of why I am a part of Enfoque Ixcán, it is apparent they do not balance.



Dwight Fleck

“THE TRUISM THAT TRAVEL AND BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH OTHERS IS BROADENING IS A TRUISM BECAUSE IT IS TRUE.”



Dwight assisting with eye exams during 2012 trip to the Ixcán

### SIGHT IS A GIFT CONTINUED

*Continued from page 1*

Recently, Carlos shared with me, “*Gracias a Dios, ya estoy bien. Ya no duele tanto. Estoy tranquilo.*” “Thanks be to God, I am now well. I don’t have much pain. I’m peaceful.”

I am relieved and happy to

have someone to turn to when people come to me with eye pain. Enfoque Ixcán is providing an invaluable service to the people of the Ixcán. Sight is one gift none of us want to lose.



Carlos Cuyuch

**EYE HEALTH PROMOTERS' REPORT**

BY SCOTT PIKE

Felipe and Arnulfo, our eye health promoters, are very remarkable men. They continue to get busier with each report they end me. In February through April of this year they examined 152 people. This is an increase of 18% over the same months last year. They also dispensed 80 pairs of glasses and 22 pairs of sunglasses.

The increased use of sunglasses indicates that they are also doing a good job of educating the public regarding preventive eye care. The ultra-violet rays from the sun are responsible, over the course of one's life, for an increased incidence of cataracts and damage to the retina of the eye. When eye care is not very accessible and hard to afford, being diligent about prevention is a wise choice for these people to make.

nied 9 patients on a trip for eye surgeries. This included 6 people who had a total of 7 surgeries, and 3 people returning for surgery follow-up visits. Then in May Arnulfo took 13 patients to the surgery clinic. Nine of them had 13 eye surgeries and 4 people were returning for surgery follow-ups.

What makes these trips busy for Felipe and Arnulfo is that they stay with the patients receiving surgeries for a week, at the clinic, providing care. They instill eye drops, help in getting food to the patients, and assist them as they move around, as many are elderly. All the while, Felipe and Arnulfo sleep on the concrete floor when there are no extra beds (most of the time). The clinic has beds for the patients to use during their 6 days at the clinic.

The devotion and hard work of our eye health promot-

ers is inspiring. When I see how determined they are to bring eye care to their communities in Ixcán, I am motivated to continue supplying them with glasses, sunglasses, eye drops and training. This also makes the fundraising part of my work more important and less of a burden. The glasses, sunglasses and 20 surgeries listed above cost Enfoque Ixcán just over \$2300.

**Totals, 1997 to date:**

- Cataract surgeries—139
- Other eye surgeries —71
- Glasses dispensed —1809

Each and every one of our generous donors deserves a hearty "THANK YOU" for making eye care a reality for the people of Ixcán. In fact, that is the message Felipe gives me to relay to you each month when we talk on the telephone.



Felipe assisting with an acuity check

**ENFOQUE IXCÁN BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

- Dr. Scott Pike, president
- Dwight Fleck, treasurer
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**THE JOY OF SEEING SADIE GROW AND PROSPER**



Sadie in 2005 at age 3 with her mother



Sadie in 2009 at age 7 with her mother



Sadie in 2012 at age 10 with Drs. Arvidson and Pike

The pictures above show, Sadie, a young girl from the Ixcán that injured her left eye when she was around 18 months old resulting in very little vision in that eye. Over the past 8 years, Enfoque Ixcán has worked with her and her family to fit Sadie for glasses. Sadie is a model patient and continues to wear her glasses daily. She and her mother come to see EI every few years for a check up and to be refitted for glasses. It has been a true joy to see her grow and prosper.



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## EI PARTNERS WITH OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY FOR PATIENT SURVEYS

Over the past five years, EI conducted two patient eye care surveys to help better understand EI's impact in the region. The objective of the two surveys was to build a greater understanding of the current patients of EI, their awareness of available eye health care, and their eye care needs.

The interviews were conducted by the regional school coordinator and student volunteers in the Ixcán. Fourteen questions were repeated throughout both sets of interviews, which allowed for comparing and contrasting of the responses from 2008 to 2011.

EI enlisted the assistance of the Close to the Customer

Project (C2C) at Oregon State University to organize and analyze the collected data from the two surveys.

The C2C Project is part of the Austin Entrepreneurship program at OSU's College of Business and provides professional market research and consulting services delivered by faculty/student teams. In doing that, C2C brings faculty expertise and research experience into the community and provides students with experiential learning opportunities that prepare them for marketing careers.

"This was a wonderful opportunity for students to learn and expand their skills in data analysis while gaining a broader understanding of how

this information can help people in a different part of the world," said Amanda Terhes, EI board member and C2C's Director of Affinity Research.

The OSU student research team was made up of three students, two undergraduate and one MBA student. Mikaela Inman, senior in Marketing was the project manager.

In discussing her experiences working on the EI project she said, "Having the opportunity to work on an international project gave my team the inspiration to complete something new and exciting. As a team, we were able to teach each other and learn together to achieve the final product."



Mikaela Inman, 2013 OSU Marketing graduate and project manager for EI survey project

"WORKING AT C2C AND ON THE EI PROJECT HELPED ME TO GAIN THE EMPLOYMENT I CURRENTLY HAVE AND I KNOW IT HAS PREPARED ME FOR FUTURE CHALLENGES BOTH IN AND OUT OF THE OFFICE."