Eye Health Promoters Update

In the second quarter of 2014 our Eye Health Promoters’ (EHP) continued their fine service to the people of Ixcán. (This, in spite of the fact that one of them was sick with gastrointestinal problems for nearly a month.) Felipe and Arnulfo examined 83 people and dispensed 71 pairs of glasses and sun-glasses. As usual, they ran out of lubricating eye drops before the end of May. As usual, they ran out of lubricating eye drops before the end of May.

In May Felipe accompanied 25 patients to the eye clinic in San Benito (5 hours away) where 16 surgeries were performed, including 11 for cataracts. Food and lodging, and the cost of the surgery was funded by Enfoque Ixcán, through donations from our supporters. Your donations really do make an important difference in the lives of many people. It only takes $125 to pay for a cataract surgery at the social service clinic we utilize. Remember your donations are tax deductible.

In August the EHPs will work side by side with optometry students from Pacific University on our 12th annual trip, a collaboration between Enfoque Ixcán and Amigos Eye Care. You’ll be able to read the results of that trip in our Fall newsletter and on line with photos at www.enfoqueixcan.org.

Occasionally I lose sight of some of the underlying reasons that made me interested in starting our eye care project in Ixcán. The top reasons were, and are, the people and the need. On my last trip to Ixcán I met a family who helped me re-focus, in a rather personal way.

On Wednesday, February 19th, I and two others in our group went to lunch at the home of Ruldolfo and Celia in Santa María Tejía, Ixcán. It’s a long hilly walk in the heat of the day with high humidity. After about a mile we left the dirt road and followed a steep path, down then up, to their home. The view was worth the effort. It’s a simple home, even by Ixcán standards; dirt floors, sticks and boards tied together vertically to make the walls, thatched roof, no electricity or running water.

As we ate a meal of eggs and tortillas I was captivated by Ruldolfo’s broad smile, their 4 children’s cooperative and enthusiastic play and Celia’s watchful and confident eyes. They obviously enjoyed each other and weren’t intimidated or embarrassed having some “rich” gringos as guests in their simple home. As one of the boys sat on the floor spoon-feeding a parrot some of the meal, we got into a conversation about their history in the village.

Ruldolfo’s parents were members of the village founders, a small group that came to the region to 1970 and settle and form a community cooperative. They walked over the mountains and through the jungle for 7 days with all there belonging to find this location. Ruldolfo was born in the mid 70’s and turned themselves over to the military to avoid starvation. Ruldolfo’s family, like everyone else, fled into the jungle where they survived off the land for 2-3 months, constantly hiding and running from the soldiers. Eventually, they turned themselves over to the military to avoid starvation.

Cilia’s family moved to Santa María Tejía in 1983, a year after the village massacre and burning. They also came from the mountains to the south fleeing a region where military violence was even greater. Like Ruldolfo’s family, they were assigned places to live and given farmland which belonged to other villagers, the families who had fled to Mexico to escape the Guatemalan army. During these years both Celia and Ruldolfo lost their fathers to torture and death by the military. Being the oldest son, Ruldolfo left school after second grade to help his mother provide for the family.

These were difficult times living under the thumb of the soldiers. There was little or no education for the children. Men were required to assist the Army serving in Civil Patrols to “protect” the village. When the refugees in Mexico were allowed to return to Guatemala in 1993, they were given their land back. This meant that families who had been given land by the army, like Ruldolfo’s...
**Patient Update: Santiago**

**By Scott Pike**

Once in a while it’s nice to look back to one of our previous patients to see how they’re doing.

We first saw Santiago in 2003. He came to see us because his vision was failing and hoped we might have some glasses to help him. Instead, we found that significant cataracts were limiting his vision. Santiago said, “I often fall on the steep and uneven path on the way to my farmland (parcela), because I don’t see the holes and bumps, especially in dim light of early morning and evening.”

Santiago was in his mid-60’s then and he had children still in school. He was worried that he wouldn’t be able to continue to work; to plant, grow and harvest food for his wife and children. The worry would often lead him to tears. We arranged an appointment for Santiago at an eye clinic in Guatemala City to have his cataracts removed.

When I saw him a year later he was seeing well again. His cataract surgeries were a success and Enfoque Ixcán only had to pay less than $300 for them. He was happy to be able to work without so much risk of falling and injuring himself. His family was happy too.

In February of this year when I was examining eyes at the health post in Santiago’s village, I saw him approaching. He didn’t look much different than on our first meeting 10 year before, except that he was walking confidently. He came to see me to thank Enfoque Ixcán once again for his eye surgeries. Now, in his 70’s, Santiago is still working in his parcela growing food for sale and to feed his family.

For only $300 in donations Santiago’s life had been turned around. He’s still enjoying good vision 10 years later. He thanked me, but he was really thanking all of our generous donors.

**Change is Inevitable**

Change is inevitable. I noticed this phenomenon today after looking at a 1997 photo of myself, and then taking a peek in the mirror. My hair color has changed and the broad lines on my face. But you can’t look much different. So goes the world, I rationalized. Then I started recalling some things that haven’t changed since we started Enfoque Ixcán:

1. Eighty-two percent of the people of Ixcán, Guatemala still live in poverty, with 27% in extreme poverty.

2. It still takes an nearly an hour to travel, in the village bus, the 13 miles from our eye health promoter, Felipe’s, home to our office in Playa Grande. This is provided the bus doesn’t get stuck in the mud along the way.

3. There are still several thousand Ixcán residents who are blind from cataracts.

4. We can still send these people to a Guatemalan eye clinic and have their vision restored with surgery for as little as $125 (surgery, lodging and food for 3 days).

5. And, we continue to depend on the generosity of you, our faithful supporters, to make glasses and eye surgeries possible for this region of Guatemala.

Some change just happens with time, like the lines on my face. But you have the ability to create change, the change that can help an unfortunate people have access to affordable eye care and make their lives more meaningful and productive.

Thanks for being an agent for change!

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Dr. Ronald Craig Stout

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**What Makes You Happy Continued**

and Cilia’s, had to move and find other land to live on and had to give up their farms.

So, here they are today still living on a piece of land that doesn’t belong to them. They have no income to buy land with. They could be evicted if an owner with a title came over or if the government wanted to use “their” land. The weight of this story was feeling overwhelming. I had to take a break. I looked out the open door as a chicken walked in looking for table scraps. One of two family dogs rested peacefully in the corner. The two daughters sat next to and on Cilia’s lap. The two boys ran and climbed and played, like I used to. Outside the air was still and humid. Flowers and trees surrounded us and I could feel myself relaxing again.

The conversation changed and the broad smile returned to Rul-dolfo’s face, the children laughed, Cilia beamed with pride when we commented on what a beautiful home they have. In my mind I compared my life to theirs. I can’t even imagine what suffering and hardship they have been through. Yet, here they are, a loving, caring family with the basic needs for happiness all about them. And I thought to myself, “What makes you happy?”
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Change is inevitable. I noticed this phenomenon today after looking at a 1997 photo of myself, and then taking a peek in the mirror. My hair color has changed. The skin under my chin seems to be sagging. I have hearing aids in my ears. It almost didn’t happen. I have vision. Santiago said, “I have hearing aids in my ears. It almost didn’t happen. I have vision.”

"So goes the world,” I thought to myself, “and I am changing and the broad smile returned to Rudolfo’s face, the children laughed, Cilia beamed with pride when we commented on what a beautiful home they have. In my mind I compared my life to theirs. I can’t even imagine what suffering and hardship they have been through. Yet, here they are, a loving, caring family with the basic needs for happiness all about them. And I thought to myself, “What makes you happy?”

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**What Makes You Happy?**

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**Over the Top**

Over the top! That’s how the Enfoque Ixcan board of directors feels about the response of support we received from our special appeal for funds to build a clinic in Ixcan. Thanks to all of you who were able help. Together we raised nearly $22,000, and you put us “over the top.”

For 17 years we have been building the foundation for a sustainable organization. We have served over 10,900 people, dispensed over 230 eye surgeries and improved the quality of life for an entire region. In doing this we have employed local residents, received the help of Guatemalan eye care professionals, educated area teachers regarding eye care and the prevention and treatment of eye problems, and secured the backing of the local public health office and a Guatemalan Rotary Club.

You, our supporters, made this happen and I hope you share the pride the board of directors feels as we take the next step. We are now poised to lay the foundation for a permanent clinic, an enduring structure, allowing Enfoque Ixcan to better serve the people of Ixcan with space for a Guatemalan optometrist to volunteer his or her time to bring professional eye care to the region. In the future this clinic may be the staging ground for eye surgeries to be done at the new and adjacent hospital.

In addition, our team of eye health promoters will be able to work more efficiently providing basic eye care to their under served neighbors on a year around basis.

This is an exciting time for Enfoque Ixcan. As the clinic progress continues, we will keep you informed through our regular newsletters and on our web site, www.enfoqueixcan.org.

Thank you for taking us to the next level.
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Ruldolfo’s parents were members of the village founders, a small group that came to the region in 1970 to settle and form a community cooperative. They walked over the mountains and through the jungle for 7 days with all there belonging to find this location. Ruldolfo was born in the mid 70’s and was only 7 or 8 when the military came, burned all the homes and crops and killed the animals. They killed people, too, in their campaign to squash the growing guerrilla movement. Ruldolfo’s family, like everyone else, fled into the jungle where they survived off the land for 2-3 months, constantly hiding and running from the soldiers. Eventually, they turned themselves over to the military to avoid starvation.

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