

FOCUSING ON THE IXCÁN

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

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ENFOQUE IXCÁN UPDATE: OPPORTUNITY

BY DR. SCOTT PIKE

It's people like Domingo who have taught me the meaning of opportunity. Domingo was one of the first health promoters in his village. He even continued his education to become a nurse. In Guatemala being a nurse doesn't have the same significance as it does in the U.S. Domingo didn't go to college. He didn't even go to high school and I'm not sure how far he was able to go in primary school.

Domingo grew up in a tumultuous time in Ixcán, Guatemala. The region was torn apart in the late 70's and early 80's by over 300 military massacres. Villagers fled to the jungle and then over 100,000 Guatemalans fled to Mexico to safety.

Thousands remained in Ixcán and lived under military rule. In the mid 1990's the refugees in Mexico were allowed to return and communities had to be restarted mixing the refugees with the folks who had stayed behind, not always an easy task.

In the rebuilding time, Domingo became a volunteer health promoter in his village and after he got his nurse certificate, he worked for the government. But government work was unsteady and unreliable, so he did whatever he could to provide an income for his family, sometimes as a health care worker, sometimes selling vitamins, and always working on the family farm. Now he is once again working for the

Ministry of Health as a nurse, what he does best.

I saw Domingo in February. It was the first time we had had a chance visit in several years. This is when I started equating him with opportunity. He was complaining of having troubles with reading, you know the tiny print on medicine bottles. With the nearest eye doctor 4-5 hours away, getting eye care is very inconvenient. But, to fill that eye care void, the region has Enfoque Ixcán. Our local eye health promoter, Felipe, was able to

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"government work was unsteady and unreliable, so he did whatever he could to provide an income for his family"

- Dr. Scott Pike



Domingo with 2 days of firewood for his home

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Maria walking with her family near the clinic

MEET MARIA AMBROSIO

I'd like to tell you about one of our patients. Maria Ambrosio is a favorite of mine. You may have heard me talk about her before, but her story has had a big effect on me and I'd like to share what I learned from Maria.

Maria was 85 years old 8 years ago when I first saw of her. She always wore a brightly colored huipil, or top, with the color and pattern of the Mayan area she came from, red. The top part was embroidered with a rainbow of colors in 15 or 20 circular rings growing larger as they extended from the neckline. This was handmade.

I was a little concerned that we were going to pay for both of her cataract surgeries. We didn't have a lot of money and wouldn't the money be better spent on someone younger with more life ahead of them?

Maria's quality of life had gone downhill because of her blindness. Her son and his family took care of her, which meant walking with her the one mile to church or helping her to the

latrine in the middle of the night. She was pretty helpless and the deep wrinkles in her face and her frail looking body gave the impression of someone nearing the end of life.

Our limited resources could be spent on a 60 year old, still strong, with years of life ahead of them.

Two years after Maria had had cataract surgeries to both of her eyes she walked to the health post, without help, to thank us for regaining her sight. She was now making tortillas for the family meals, walking around their yard to enjoy the many flowers, taking herself to the latrine and continuing to embroider huipiles. I watched her do it! Not only had her quality of life improved, but she now had the dignity of being able to care for herself and contribute to the family.

Last February I had lunch with her son, Tomas, and his wife. Maria now lives with her daughter in a village where she had started her life 93 year

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find Domingo a pair of reading glasses so he could read the medicine instructions with ease. Enfoque Ixcán has provided the region a measure of basic eye care. Domingo has the opportunity to continue doing the work he loves, helping his people. All it took was a pair of reading glasses. It occurred to me that opportunities like this are the main difference between Domingo's life and mine. Simply by where we were born our lives were shaped by opportunity, Domingo's lack of opportunity and my abundance of opportunity. How fortunate I have been. Let's spread some opportunity!



Domingo with his new glasses

ago. She's not in good health, but still enjoys life with the good vision Enfoque Ixcán paid for her to have. Her son says she still gives thanks to everyone who had a hand in providing her successful cataract surgeries.

I no longer worry about using our limited, donated funds to restore anyone's eyesight. Vision is a gift and worthwhile at any age. Maria taught me that.

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Shannon delivering baby clothes to the nuns in the Ixcán

SHANNON CURRIER, OD—NEW EI COUNCIL OF ELECTORS MEMBER

Shannon graduated with her degree in optometry in 2014 and has spent the last year as an Optometric Resident at the Portland VA. While in optometry school she made two trips to Ixcán, Guatemala with Enfoque Ixcán, as a volunteer with Amigos Eye Care. Amigos is a student organization which travels to many less developed countries to provide much needed eye care to the poor.

A native of Montana, Shannon grew up in Helena, Montana and this summer (2015) she is returning to the Big Sky Country to join an optometric practice in Dillon, in the southwest corner of the state.

Shannon is fluent in Spanish and this proved very beneficial on her previous Ixcán trips. She was not only able to bond with the local people but also provided important translation in meetings and when the group was traveling. We are looking forward to having Shannon with us on future trips to Guatemala and in the year to year work of the organization.

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EYE HEALTH PROMOTERS REPORT

In the first half of 2015 our eye health promoters (EHP) have maintained a steady pace, seeing patients, dispensing glasses and accompanying patients to the eye clinic for eye surgeries.

By the end of June they had examined 181 people and dispensed 83 pairs of glasses. The two EHPs take turns staffing our central office in the town of Cantabal and they also see patients in their own communities.

Felipe has taken 2 groups of patients to the Visualiza eye clinic for eye surgeries. This is a 5 hour trip, one way. The patients stay there for 3 days for their procedure and then return to the clinic one week later for a post surgical follow-up visit. Your donations have funded 31 eye surgeries this year, including 24 cataract removals. We also pay for the patients' food and lodging for the trips. The patients pay for the transportation, which usually costs about \$25 for the 2 round trips.

In addition to the surgery trips, Felipe has begun extra eye care training at the Visualiza clinic. On these trips he stays at the clinic for two weeks working alongside the other health promoters, administrators and doctors. He's gaining important experience and knowledge which will enhance and sustain our work in Ixcán.

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