ENFOQUE IXCÁN: ALTERNATIVE MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE INTERNATIONAL MISSION ORGANIZATIONS  

By Brian Arvidson, OD

Isn’t this a curious time given the debate over whether health care is a basic right or just a privilege? With the ability to diagnose and treat most ailments, illness and injuries at a local clinic, we are blessed to have cutting edge health care. As we debate in this country whether health care is a basic right, there are places in the world with no local health care provider (doctor, nurse or technician) or simple diagnostic equipment to diagnose the most common illnesses or repair a simple bone fracture. International humanitarian aid organizations are working to provide fundamental care throughout the world but funding and the length of time these services can be maintained are all question marks with no answers. Who will provide care if funding is discontinued or these organizations leave? Is there any alternative or differing philosophy of building local support structures, educating local people to provide their own care, and establish an in-country referral system to bridge the gap for those individuals with curable diseases?

Enfoque Ixcán is such an organization!

I have been a board member and proud supporter of the NGO Enfoque Ixcán for over a decade now working closely with the people of Guatemala in the remote province of the Ixcán to establish basic eyecare for an indigenous community ravaged by civil war and national government neglect. The region of over 100,000 souls has no access to basic eyecare without traveling 4 hours by bus for a simple glasses examination and further for a comprehensive vision examination; a financial hardship for a population of mostly subsistence farmers. They are an industrious population with a strong work ethic and even stronger sense of community. Over the past 10 years I have been blessed to be accepted into this community, which remains one of the reasons that I return year after year to provide essential eyecare to these people. What makes our mission unique is the forward thinking of our organization’s founder, Dr. Scott Pike.

Currently, we employ and educate local eye health promoters to provide basic examinations and consultations for eye surgeries.
We work closely with a Guatemalan ophthalmology group, Visualiza, to provide cataract surgery (one of the very few treatable causes of blindness) and consultations for more critical care like Maria Elena (Vol 12 Issue 2, Summer 2016), who was diagnosed with a brain tumor and had a life-saving brain surgery. Visualiza is a 5-6 hour bus ride from the Ixcán and very costly for the poor. Currently we use our funds from your wonderful donations to provide life altering surgeries for blindness. Soon we will start construction on a plot of land generously donated by the municipality of Playa Grande to build a stand-alone clinic!

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YOUR PART IN A TRANSFORMATION

By Scott Pike, OD

Susana, thanks to your help, has been transformed! In our last newsletter in the Spring, we shared a story about a young woman, Susana, who had a badly injured and infected eye. She used her long dark hair to keep it out of view and she did her best to stay out of the limelight. (Vol 13 Issue 1, Spring 2017)

When we saw her, she was having no physical pain and due to her family’s poverty and the long distance to an eye doctor, she and her family had no choice but to just let it be.

This is a glaring example of lack of access to eye care.

Thanks to your donations, we had funds to help Susana. In May our eye health promoter, Felipe and Susana’s father, took Susana to Guatemala City to the eye clinic Visualiza. The doctors saw the gravity of Susana’s problem, a boiling infection which could affect not only her vision, but if untreated, her life.

They were able to remove the eye, which had been without sight for some time, and gave her a temporary prosthetic eye (see the accompanying photo). Immediately her self-image went up. There is a significant healing process for Susana. The swelling needs to go down. The tissue in her eye socket needs to heal. But, soon Susana will be fit with a permanent prosthetic eye.

As you can imagine, this will be a transformational event for this lovely young woman. She will no longer need to hide her eye behind her hair. She will no longer have to live in the shadows.

I will be seeing Susana in August and look forward to hearing her story. I’ll share it with you.

Look into the eyes of someone whose life is vastly improved because of your gift.
A NEW LEVEL OF PROFESSIONAL CARE

By Rolando Cabrera, Optometrist

Rolando Cabrera is a Guatemalan optometrist who has been a friend and collaborator with Enfoque Ixcán (EI) for 15 years. In May of this year with the help of our Rotary International grant, we sent Rolando to Ixcán to see patients. This was a pilot trip to test out the viability of bringing a new level of professional eye care to the people of Ixcán. The following is Rolando’s report of his first trip. (translated)

May 25th, 2017—Caught dealing with the nervousness of traveling to a remote, hot and humid environment to work under unusual conditions, I had a little fear of what was to come. This was my first trip alone to the beautiful and distant department Quiche to help solve the problem of access to eye care the people of Ixcán have been struggling with for decades.

I first drove my car 4 hours to Coban and transferred myself and my testing equipment to a local bus for the final 3-1/2 hours to Playa Grande and the EI office. On arrival I met Felipe, the eye health promoter. He had everything prepared for me to begin work the next morning. Felipe’s attentive care was going to make my work much easier than I thought. A month earlier Felipe had sent out flyers and placed radio announcements to alert patients to this eye health care opportunity.

The schedule was set up so that I would see people in the morning at the EI clinic for the poor. In the afternoon we operated like a semi-private office. People who didn’t mind paying to have an appointment and not have to wait in line, could see me and select from new frames and special lens designs.

At 7 am Friday morning some patients had already formed a line at the EI office located in the Catholic Church compound. Children, adults and seniors came to me seeking answers for their eye problems. Besides needing glasses, the people had cataracts and other eye problems needing eye surgeries and some came with untreatable cornea wounds. I was fortunate to assist with a follow-up exam on a young woman (Susana) who had one eye surgically removed just 10 days earlier.

Neither rain nor heat prevented individuals and families from attending their appointments, and on Saturday morning we began the same process again. The people with appointments were happy to be examined and choose from a selection of frames for their new glasses. The people who came in the mornings were pleased to receive exams and glasses for a minimal charge.

When we finished we had examined 45 people. Twelve will be sent for cataract surgeries, 9 received glasses. In addition, 7 others ordered prescription glasses from my afternoon appointments.

This test trip with Enfoque Ixcán was successful and taught us how we can make it even better. That chance will come in October when I make my second trip, this time without the nervousness of this initial trip.
A fully equipped clinic will allow us to continue bringing a Guatemalan optometrist to the area but also expand services we provide, including one day providing eye surgeries in the Ixcan.

We know that there may come a time when we can no longer make a sojourn to this beautiful region but we want there to be a lasting legacy of trained local eye health promoters, a fully equipped local clinic, regular visitation of doctors of optometry, and direct referral for surgical care when needed.

These are some of the reasons that I believe so strongly in our organization and our mission to provide basic vision services to these deserving individuals of the Ixcan. It is the reason that I continue to provide my time and money despite a busy practice and young family. Please join me in being part of an organization that is curing blindness and uniquely establishing a sustainable model for humanitarian missions that could be replicated in other far corners of the globe. Maybe we can all take the leap, like Dr. Scott Pike, using our unique skill sets to change the lives of our fellow men and women.

***** Don’t forget to go to Amazonsmile.com, select Enfoque Ixcán, so a percentage of each of your purchases supports EI’s efforts. *****