

INTERNATIONAL EYE INSTITUTE ★ 2021 NEWSLETTER

2021 has been a year of challenges. International Eye Institute (IEI) has found creative ways to support and even expand needed eye care to the people of Guatemala during the COVID pandemic. In early 2021, we sponsored surgical procedures (mostly cataracts) performed by local Guatemalan surgeons, delivered much needed equipment to partner organizations and succeeded in resuming our surgical missions to Guatemala.

After a 2-year absence, a large team of 35 volunteers was prepped for a mission trip in November with high hopes of taking care of the backlog of surgery that went undone during the pandemic. Then came the Delta wave, and a Level 4 travel advisory led to cancellation of this well-planned trip. Responding to heartfelt pleas from hospital staff regarding the desperate need for our assistance, we assembled a “micro-team” of 5 volunteers and with the help of 3 Guatemalan providers made plans to do whatever was necessary to reestablish our presence at Hospitalito and begin our work anew.

The importance of the “micro-team” mission was marked by the welcome from Hospitalito Medical Director Dr. Manuel when he stated that our presence was symbolic of a return to normalcy in a mountain town ravaged by COVID. Hospital staff and patients went out of their way to thank us. Most sobering however, was seeing the blind patients we were unable to help 2 years ago return...still blind. 2 additional years of unnecessary blindness, all because they did not have access to the care they needed.

One particular family is well known to us. There are 7 family members with bilateral congenital cataracts. 5 years ago, IEI Drs. StormoGipson and Shah operated on 3 of the children. A total of 14 surgeries were needed to take care of this family. Each year we have returned, we have performed 2 or 3 additional surgeries. After letting all his kids have their surgeries done first, the dad finally got his turn in November. We have witnessed a slow but steady transformation in this family from helpless to animated and fully functioning. This micro-team was needed, and we were grateful to answer the call for help.



One of the most exciting aspects of this reopening with Hospitalito is a new collaboration that Dr. Dance established with a Guatemalan eye surgery team from Hospital Evangelico El Buen Samaritano (HEEBS) in Chichicastenango.



DR. DANCE, ELIZABETH GARCIA, JULIE CRANDALL, RN, MADDY CHRISTENSEN, COA, ALI MOYER, COA AND GUATEMALAN TEAM MEMBERS.

The HEEBS team was led by Dr. Julio DeLeon, a skilled ophthalmic surgeon. It also included a resident in ophthalmology, an optometrist, and a scrub tech. They worked hand and glove with the IEI team and accomplished an incredible amount in a short period of time: In just one week they completed 150 clinic visits and 50 surgeries: 36 cataracts (8 bilaterally blind, 10 unilaterally blind, 18 with severe visual impairment), 14 pterygia, 2 glaucoma stents, 2 eyelid surgeries, and 1 abscess drainage. Each of the IEI volunteers logged 52 hours of travel, 77 hours of work, 1.5 hours of play, delivering over \$150,000 worth of care in a long week...and returned home, as always, with the priceless gift of gratitude and the joy of seeing patients rediscover their sight!



The collaboration with HEEBS began when a piece of equipment critical to eye surgery (Phaco unit) stopped working for Dr. De Leon. Dr. De Leon contacted Dr. Dance and IEI was eager to help. We transferred one of our units housed at Hospitalito (lying dormant during the pandemic) to HEEBS. Less than a week after the disruption, Dr. DeLeon was able to resume surgical work in Chichicastenango. Then, after procuring replacement units and shipping them to Guatemala, the International Eye Institute converted our temporary loan into a permanent donation to HEEBS (a value of over \$10,000).



Dr. Dance, Dr. De Leon and the administration of Hospitalito have now reached an agreement to expand our collaboration and have arranged for an ophthalmologist-in-training to work year-round at Hospitalito beginning in 2022. Dr De Leon will provide the supervision and training. IEI surgical teams will return on a regular basis to bring needed supplies and equipment, help train, transfer skills, and step in to operate on patients who cannot afford care. Our hope is that no pandemic, political or regional conflict or other unforeseen disruption, will ever result in unnecessary years of blindness in this community again! In some ways, the pandemic has forced us in a direction that may ensure greater access and continuity of care than we ever dreamed possible just a few years ago.

The collaboration with HEEBS has also allowed us to make better use of donations. When our teams leave, there are often supplies and medications that don't get completely used up. These supplies are at risk of expiring prior to use and going to waste. Donating excess supplies to HEEBS (an organization that shares our mission to lower cost and increase access to eye care in Guatemala) maximizes the good of these donations. It's a win-win-win situation!



IEI also continues to support Pedro, a resident of the Lake Atitlan community, with a full Maj StormoGipson Memorial Scholarship for his lab-tech training and certification as he moves into his final clinical/practical year. Pedro plans to return to Hospitalito to help establish a much-needed blood bank.

We are excited by our accomplishments in 2021 and recognize that they are only made possible by the generous donations of individuals and organizations that support us. We are most grateful to North Idaho Eye Institute, the Southern Eye Bank, Americares, Grace Surrounds Us, ImprimisRX and the Innovia Foundation for their ongoing support throughout the years. We couldn't do what we do without the volunteer efforts of our team members, and the generous donations from all of you. We have witnessed gratitude in its purest form in the eyes of our patients who marvel at the world they see as they rediscover sight and extend that gratitude to where it belongs - to all of you.

We are looking forward to an exciting 2022 and a return in May to Guatemala. Thank you for your continued support!

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