

**Health Talents International
Eye Surgery Trip, Guatemala
May 12-19, 2012**

Trip Participants: Ophthalmologist: Larry Patterson; Optometrist: Mardee O'Donnell; OR Nurse: Trudy Hedgecough; Med Students: Michael Patterson, Grace Shih, Adrian Furman; Nursing Students: Sarah Warren, Chris Gray, Mary Leigh Baker, Katelyn Walker; Eye Tech: Matt Page; Pre-Med Students: Danielle Kelvas, Chris Gross; Character VBS team: Jamie Bacalan, Devin Fogle, Craig Jensen; Translator: Mary Patterson; Chaplain: Amos Allen; Team Leaders: Rick Harper, Julie Wheatley

What a wonderful week we shared together in Guatemala. The trip got off to a nice start for everyone but Danielle. She missed the flight out of Nashville and had a whirlwind of a time getting herself and her luggage to Guatemala. Thankfully, Danielle was able to join the team on Sunday and her luggage showed up finally on Tuesday afternoon. Other than her bumpy road to Guatemala the team had smooth sailing through customs and made it safely to Montellano. Once in Montellano on Saturday the team unloaded all the supplies they brought down and got to work preparing for VBS and doing vision checks on patients in clinic. Mardee, Mary and Matt made a great team as they worked patient by patient getting patient's vision checked, dilating eyes and examining eyes. Mardee was a huge help in getting things set up for surgery the following day and allowing Larry to pitch in and help Trudy get the OR ready for surgery the following day.

The VBS team got to work cutting shields out of cardboard for the 400 school children who would be coming to Ezell throughout the week to hear about the Armor of God from Ephesians 6. Craig was on the ball finding curriculum and preparing the lessons for the children before the group headed down to Guatemala. Jamie was the game planner who came up with the wonderful idea of doing Simon Says using motions related to each piece in the Armor of God. Devin and Amos were helping hands who worked along with Jamie and Craig until they couldn't feel their fingers any more from having cut out so many shields! There was a minor crisis when Danielle's suitcase didn't arrive on Sunday because it had supplies for the VBS crafts. Thankfully, Dr. Silvia had some things on hand which worked as great substitutes for the missing items in the suitcase and the crafts worked out just fine.

Saturday evening the team shared a meal of tacos and had a short introduction time and orientation before heading off to bed. Sunday morning it was back to work preparing for surgery, VBS and then time for service at the local church in Montellano. The team walked across the street and worshipped with the Montellano Church of Christ. Carlos the director of HTI gave a great sermon in Spanish with a recap in English for the team. He talked about how we as Christians should give of a "scent" which is pleasing to the Lord.

After church Dr. Walter and RN Rosario gathered with the team to talk them through the hospital rules and standards. Shortly after lunch it was time to head to the OR for the first case. Thankfully things went well and the team members all pitched in to fill the needed spots and help things go smoothly. Chris Gray was our OR1 man most of the week. He selflessly served and cared for our patients putting in their eye drops pre-op and prepping them for surgery.

Several others rotated through helping do pre-op drops in the recovery area and in OR1. Mary Leigh, Sarah and Kaitlyn were all able to train under Trudy about how to circulate and turn over the OR between cases. They all had a hand in helping with each stage of surgery. Mary Leigh's Spanish skills were also a huge help to the team. She made patients feel comfortable and well cared for. Mary also served as a translator doing vision checks and helping Mardee in clinic. She was a light to the team and the patients.

That evening Amos shared his first devotional with the team. Amos' devotional times throughout the week were such a blessing. Hearing from someone who spent so much time in his own life as a missionary to Kenya was truly special. He was able to bring a different perspective to the team, leading us to see things from the Guatemalan perspective or to seek to understand the culture. He helped the group process about their own lives by asking what challenges there are to personal faith for those working in the medical field. He led several discussions like this to help the team see our strengths and weaknesses while seeking to know God more deeply no matter what situation we find ourselves in. Amos was also a wonderful influence on the team because he invested in each and every team members. By the end of the week Amos had touched the hearts of so many of us with his kindness and thoughtful questions and comments. Our team was certainly blessed by his presence.

Monday was a busy day. The surgical team got started right after breakfast and made their way through the patients scheduled for the day. The VBS team had their first group of students, the 5th and 6th graders from the Montellano elementary school. The students came in two waves so the VBS team did their program twice each day. Julie taught the students about the Armor of God; truth, righteousness, peace, salvation, faith in God's provision for them, and the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. After the lesson the children played a Simon Says game with motions corresponding with each piece of "armor". They sang the song "I'm in the Lord's army" and made a craft. The boys were given cardboard shields of Faith which they covered with tin foil and decorated. The girls each received a ribbon belt with pretty beads and markers to write the word "VERDAD" which means Truth in Spanish.

The students were thrilled with their shields and belts reminding them of God's love and protection. Jamie and Craig served as the soldier for the lesson. They put on a cardboard breastplate, helmet, shoes, shield and sword. Piece by piece the soldier costume came together throughout the week until the soldier was fully equipped for the battle against sin and evil! Amos, Danielle, Devin and Kaitlyn all participated helping the children tape tin foil onto shields or tie beads onto their strings and pin their belts together. Each child got a few moments of attention from one of the "gringos".

VBS took place on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday in which time close to 400 children were taught, played with and loved on. The school teachers and principal were grateful for HTI's involvement with the children of Montellano. The VBS team did a great job planning and orchestrating the program and deserved a huge pat on the back as the last children left on Wednesday.

Several people also had the opportunity to head out of Clinica Ezell to see the various sites around the area or to visit mobile medical clinics or villages where HTI is doing community development. Danielle, Katelyn, Mary Leigh, Chris Gray, Adrian, Chris Gross, and Grace all had a chance to go to mobile medical or community development clinics. Several of them came back with changed hearts. Adrian was touched by Dr. David's prayers as he treated his patients. Katelyn was energized and excited about continuing her studies as a nurse and being able to one day help see patients of her own. The team members were impressed with the organization with which HTI carries out clinics in conjunction with the local Christians. They could plainly see the blessing this ministry is in the lives of the patients...not only because of the medical treatment but also because of the holistic care for the individuals. Both medical and spiritual needs are treated, social and mental needs are addressed. We praise God for the beautiful opportunity he gives HTI to serve in this way and always thank Him as well for bringing teams like this one to experience what HE is doing in Guatemala!

On Tuesday the team had a special eye surgery patient. A lovely young Guatemalan girl in her early thirties came in with a traumatic cataract. Neither Mardee, Michael or Larry could see her retina past the cataract upon examining her but they decided to operate and pray that her eye would be healthy behind that milky white lens. The surgery went well and Larry was able to get a lens into her eye to make it compatible with her "good eye". That night the doctors just couldn't wait so they snuck down to the ward after devotional to see how their special patient was doing. They removed the patch from her eye and asked her if she could see the doctors standing before her. Well thanks to God she could indeed! She could see Mardee, Michael and Larry but not only that she could count their fingers and see detail her eye had not seen in so very long! The beautiful young woman was brought to tears as she thanked God and thanked her doctors for restoring sight where once she was blind.

Wednesday afternoon the team wrapped up surgery early and decided to head out to the cacao farm to see some of the natural beauty of Guatemala. They had a great time looking at the awesome Ceiba tree, hunting for bugs, and tasting cacao. On Thursday a skeleton crew worked in the OR to finish up the last patients while the VBS crew and a few others headed up to see Lake Atitlan and enjoy a nice lunch at Hotel Toliman. Once the OR crew wrapped up surgery Danny took them into Chicacao where Michael got to go visit the home of his MET host family and the whole crew got to enjoy some inc cream from Saritas. It was a great day for the team and a wonderful way to wrap up the last day at Ezell.

Eye surgery clinics are always miraculous. We servants of God may not be able to place dirt on a blind man's eye but with His help we can help the blind to see and praise God for that miracle! All together there were 31 surgeries, many more optometry patients seen and close to 400 children nurtured this week.

On Friday morning the prior day's patients were discharged and final hugs were given before the team loaded up onto the bus and headed out for Antigua. The group made it to Antigua without any trouble and spent a fun day shopping, eating and visiting. That evening we all shared a nice dinner at Hotel Antigua before saying good night. Saturday morning Hotel Antigua had a beautiful breakfast buffet spread for the team to feast upon before they loaded back onto the bus and headed to the airport. Once again the trip to the airport was uneventful and everyone made their flights home without any trouble.

By: Julie Wheatley



