

**Health Talents International Trip report**  
**July 6-13, 2019 Eye Surgery**  
(David and Susan Mellor trip leaders)

*Team Participants: Eye Surgeons: Monica Hall, John Shipp; Oculoplastic Surgeon: Peter Truong; Anesthesiologist: Micah Hatch; Dentist: Bob Huffstutter; Nurse Practitioner Dermatology: Rhonda Burdeaux; Optician: Judy Sisson; OR scrub nurse: Kelly Greenwood Surgical Tech: Katrina Hess; Ophthalmic assistants: Jennifer Shipp, Jerry Hall Recovery Room RN: Alice Bush, Erin Cohen, Jackie Diaz, Allison Garrett, Karla Perkins, Emily Poterala; ACU Nursing Students: Jessica Perkins, Ava Pancamo, Claire Eglit, Maggie Moody, Brandi Whitaker, Sarah Brannon, Kathryn Norman; Translators: Rita Huffstutter, Veronica Melgar, Rita Sills; Pre-Dental student: Trace Bennett; Caregivers: Jay LeBlanc, Sharon Paskewitz, Samuel Sampson, Sara Sampson, Abby Seyer, Sherry Seyer, Cate Rivers Shipp, Seth Sims, Adam Ware, Kaylee Ware; Sterilization: David Burdeaux, Gordon James, Cary Sills*

From all over the United States, the team gathered in Guatemala City to come to Clinica Ezell to restore sight to the blind or nearly blind. The nice air-conditioned bus and boxes of fried chicken awaited the travelers and we were soon on our way west. This was a smaller group, and everyone quickly became familiar with new friends as the team began to take form.

Upon arriving at the clinic, we took a few minutes to change into scrubs, unload our suitcases in our rooms and unload the duffels of meds and supplies in the dining room. We inventoried all the supplies and before we knew it, it was time for dinner. The cooks surprised us with a new dish, it looked like a small burrito, but they called it a chicken taco. It was wonderful...as are all the meals they prepare!

The doctors got busy screening patients for the surgery schedule the next day. Dr. Truong went ahead and performed a small procedure in the exam room. So, these doctors were ready and anxious to get started.

David led a short devotional and Jay LeBlanc taught us a song in Spanish so we could sing it at worship in the morning as a surprise for the local worshippers.

## **Sunday**

Sunday morning, we ate a typical Guatemalan breakfast of eggs, beans, plantains and tortillas, then walked across the street to the church building. We enjoyed a lesson from Alex on the subject of "Finding your Purpose". The singing was moving as usual. It may not have been the tabernacle choir, but we sang our song in Spanish and everyone enjoyed our efforts!

After lunch there was a meeting with the entire group led by Dr. Walter giving us instruction about filling out the few forms required here. Then the nurses and caregivers met to go over the facility and the roles to be filled.

There was a little time to spare, so Susan took the new volunteers on a tour of the campus and grounds. There are so many interesting trees and plants that we don't see at home growing on the campus that it's nice to know what's what.

Two of three of our surgeons had never been here before, so it took a little time to get comfortable with our machinery and equipment. Also, cataracts here are often much larger and harder than those we see in the States, so they are more stubborn to remove.

By the end of Sunday afternoon's work, 11 patients had had their procedures done and were resting comfortably in a nice clean hospital bed with attentive hands comforting and caring for them.

David led a devotional thought and we retired for the evening.

## Monday

Monday was a full day of surgery. Drs. Shipp and Hall were busy with cataracts most of the day while Dr. Truong handled the exterior area of eye surgeries. One of his interesting cases involved Samuel, this eleven-year-old boy, who had been hit in the head when he was small by a load of wood. He had been stitched together after the accident, but years later one eyebrow was higher than the other, his eyelid wouldn't close completely, and the tear ducts were closed. The family wanted to know if anyone could help him.

Dr. Peter Truong is a first timer with HTI. He came with his parents as a refugee to the U.S. at 15. Speaking little English, he was placed as a junior in a public high school in California. He took his SAT's that year in what was his third language. He apparently did well - he did his undergrad studies at M.I.T. So, we were delighted to have an ocular surgeon on this trip to try to help young Samuel.



As you can see, the surgery was extensive and looks rough, but when the wounds are healed, Samuel should be more readily accepted in society and may even be the most handsome kid in school!

This day went so smoothly, we wanted to use it as an example for future days! This evening after a great meal, David led our devotional thoughts in the search for true joy. Jay LeBlanc taught us another song in Spanish. We prayed for our friends and patients and went to bed peacefully. 23 people had been treated - tomorrow would be a very important day for them.

## Tuesday

Our custom in eye surgeries is to follow the surgeons to the ward for early morning “unveilings” of yesterday’s surgical patients. Their bandages are removed, the doctor looks into the affected eye, shines a light to see if they can detect light, waves and hand to see if they detect movement, then holds up fingers to see if they can determine how many fingers are displayed. Time after time, when we hear the words, “dos” or “tres” we hear “gracias a Dios” immediately. Then we pass around the tissues because we all are moved by seeing sight restored and God praised. Few things in life are better than these few seconds.

After breakfast several are sent out on mobile medical clinics where they see the countryside and how our doctors are faced with every imaginable malady. It’s a good place for the students to see how patients are diagnosed and treated. Sadly, not all patients can be helped. One such lady came with high hopes. Dr. Shipp gently examined her and told her that he was so very sorry, but there was nothing that he could do to help her. She sobbed. He ushered her out of the examining room with kind words and called in the next patient. But, in a last desperate hope, the first lady ran back into the room, threw herself upon Dr. Shipp’s chest, sobbing and asking him to please reconsider. He tried to console her, telling her of our hope of Heaven where there will be no blindness, all too little avail. Finally, Jennifer (Dr. Shipp’s wife) said, “we can try glasses”. So, she was introduced to Judy Sisson, our optician this week, who tested her and fitted her with glasses. Our little lady leaped in the air - shouting and praising God - she could see! She ran from person to person expressing her joy. Talk about a no dry eye moment! We thought it ironic that Bro. Dave is teaching us about joy from the Bible, and this lady presented a perfect example for us to see.



19 were treated surgically today - given a new hope.

**Jennifer Shipp, our joyful patient, Judy Sisson**

## Wednesday

23 were slated for surgery today including a 3-year-old boy who had congenital cataracts in both eyes. The window of opportunity for his eyesight to be restored is a factor, so we were all prayerful for the success of this treatment.

Two weeks ago, during a surgical week, our director, Rick Harper, charcoal grilled hamburgers and made baked potatoes with all the trimmings for our gardeners. He wanted to make them feel special and show our appreciation for their never-ending work by serving them typical American fare. The smell of the grilling burgers pervaded the entire campus, and everyone wanted to know what was cooking and when do we eat? We all watched the gardeners being led to special tables for their feast while we looked on.

After lunch, Rick asked me (Susan) if I would make biscuits for the dental staff during this week of eye surgery. Being a southern girl I replied “Sure, no problem! I can throw together a batch



of biscuits in my sleep!” But a problem occurred to me: the dental staff had seen the meal the gardeners were served, and I was supposed to give them a biscuit? No way! So, I determined to make sausage gravy to go with the biscuits, butter, jelly and honey were a must, and I’d take some of the biscuit dough and roll it into cinnamon/sugar and bake it into monkey bread. Four markets later I discovered there is no Jimmy Dean sausage in all of Guatemala. There was one can of baking powder and I snatched that one up in a flash! What would have taken 10 minutes in my oven in Arkansas took 25 minutes and we still had not achieved golden brown. The chorizo sausage made passably good gravy - if you’re from Louisiana, but since they’d never tasted REAL sausage gravy I figured I could get away with it. Putting all that aside, the dental staff is still healthy, they seemed to like our typical American breakfast food, and I may have gained status as the person who tried hardest to produce a biscuit in Guatemala.



Thursday

This morning we were anxious to see our smallest patients’ progress. Our 3-year-old slept through the night and was happy to get to go home this morning. His father never left his side. It will take some time for the nerves to “wake up” and for his sight to initiate, we will continue to pray for a good outcome. If this eye is successful he will return for the second cataract to be removed.



**Dr. John Shipp examines his tiny patient**

Dr. Monica Hall is a first timer here, but certainly not new to cataract surgery. She did, however, have a new assistant. Her husband Jerry came along on the trip not realizing that he would be

## Dr. Monica Hall and her husband, Jerry check for vision

helping out in the surgical area. He had never seen his wife in this role before and he was a little in awe of what she does every day.



Tonight, for our devotional we went down to the ward and sang our newly learned Spanish hymns to the patients. It is certainly as moving for us as it is for them.

### Thursday:

This is a short day for surgeries. We try to be finished by early afternoon so the Guatemalan staff can handle the patients' recovery without the aid of the additional U.S. nurses. Most patients stay overnight and are discharged first thing after breakfast.

This octogenarian was the queen of the ward! She chattered on and on with anyone who would listen! Her surgery went well, and she was beyond thrilled with her restored sight. What a delightful little lady she was. Barefoot she came, barefoot she left, cape and all!



**David Mellor escorting our little queen. He stands 5'8"; she made him feel very tall!**



Mid-afternoon, the surgery rooms were finally quiet and dark. We took the group out to the Cocoa farm for an afternoon of sightseeing. While there, the skies opened, and all were completely drenched. No one complained when they were finally cooled off for the first time all week.



What a week God blessed us with! 86 eye procedures were accomplished, and 43 root canals were completed. Many people were praising God for the gift of restored sight and better health. We hope to see this “dream team” again next year!

