



Insight

Fall 2004

BRINGING THE GIFT OF SIGHT TO THOSE IN NEED

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Vision Health



Found in the Translation

by Paul O'Rourke

Use what language you will, you can never say anything but what you are.

—Emerson

Alberto, Ashley, Bismarck, and Henry were at the clinic when we arrived in the morning. They were there when the last one of us left in the evening. Whatever the schedule called for or wherever the need arose—clinic, vision screening, eyeglass distribution, or post-op rounds—they were there, ready, willing, and oh so able to do what they could, as best they could. These four young Nicaraguans were in-country members of VHI's recent field program in Chinandega and it seemed right from the start that an unspoken camaraderie had been established, a good sign considering they were to be our translators.

In Chinandega, as in all of VHI's field program locations, the work of translators was key to the project's ultimate success. It is a job, however, that requires more than a command of two languages, more than the ability to transpose instructions or requests or information from English into Spanish and then back to English as the responses or questions are returned. Although Alberto, Ashley, Bismarck and Henry could have easily left it at that, they added so much more to the task at hand.

A good number of VHI volunteers speak fluent Spanish; some of us do not. We need help, and I readily confess that in any number of circumstances I would have been entirely lost without a translator. Mind you, when given simple situations where a "Senora, puede ver mejor con los lentes?" or a "Cuantos dedos, señor?" are in order and the response calls for nothing more than a shake or a nod of the head, I am a veritable master of the language. Yet, when confronted with the local

dialect, delivered at a high rate of speed—addressing a topic more complicated than confirming the correct power on a pair of reading glasses or counting fingers—all of my well scripted phrases are about as useful as an umbrella in a tropical hurricane.

Alberto, Ashley, Bismarck, and Henry made my job in eyeglass distribution a

from the United States, had the power to change lives, to bring some relief, some hope and joy to places where those emotions had long been absent. And maybe for this reason, these four so quickly and so thoroughly comprehended that VHI field programs run on an energy that is beyond quantification, its only measure the enthusiasm and dedication and joy and expertise that meld into a sense of mission and transcend, by leaps and bounds, any objective definition.

Whether in vision screening with Jean,



Translators Henry (far left) and Ashley (second from left) with VHI volunteers Paul O'Rourke and Denton Ragland in Chinandega, Nicaragua.

whole lot easier. But I also knew that they were there for the same reason I was, to help Nicaraguans. More than likely these four grew up seeing and feeling the debilitating effects of poverty and natural disasters and political instability that have shaped Nicaragua over the past several decades. Somehow and somewhere they saw a value in learning English. And they understood that this language, spoken by medical volunteers

clinic with Ron, eyeglass distribution with Denton, or post-op with Melinda, they sensed our moods, our desire to help and heal, our frustrations at having so much to do with so little time, and our joys with many successful outcomes. That they were able to give expression to often-emotional moments, in English as well as in Spanish, I found remarkable; that we worked side by side with a shared concern and compassion was gratifying and humbling. When Ashley or Henry or Alberto or Bismarck spoke for me—which I must admit was often—I can truly say that they not only spoke my words, they spoke my mind, and my heart.

No translation required.

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Behind the Scenes

Gook luck, good karma, the planets in alignment, or whatever you want to call it, it was with no little serendipity that Sarah Felknor found herself at a medical equipment trade show some four to five years ago when she had the good fortune to meet Steve DiFolco. For VHI, that day proved to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Steve is the owner and founder of Integrated Health Industries, Inc, a medical supply and ophthalmic equipment distributor that has done business throughout the northeast U.S. since 1980. There was a particular piece of equipment that Steve was exhibiting at that trade show which caught Sarah's eye. The SciCan Statim Sterilizer was portable (60-70 lbs.) and perfect for the work VHI does. A deal was struck, but that was only the beginning. Steve has helped VHI with several equipment purchases at reduced prices, and has assisted greatly in the servicing of our autoclave and sterilizer, the often-expensive work accomplished, with Steve's insistent coaxing, for little

more than the cost of parts.

Integrated Health is also involved with warehousing inventory for the surgery centers with which it does business. "Some of the equipment and supplies become outdated and are no longer applicable for use, at least in the U.S.," Steve explained. "My thought was why let these items go to waste. Why not put them to good use?" Steve's idea struck a chord with one of his clients, Dr. Richard Mackool and the Mackool Eye Institute in Queens, New York. Most recently, Dr. Mackool generously donated several hundred post-op supply packs and an equal number of surgical scrubs to VHI.

The number of boxes of equipment and supplies required for setting up VHI's field programs—from eyeglasses to eye drops to ophthalmic equipment to post-op packs to surgical gowns—are amazing for the extent of generosity they represent. What is important to understand is that



Translator Alberto attends a patient in the clinic.

these indispensable items have been made available because of good people—behind the scenes—who are motivated by conscious and compassion. VHI is fortunate to know Steve DiFolco and Dr. Richard Mackool. The world is a better place because of them.

—Paul O'Rourke



We Serve

Telephone Pioneers of America provides donated eyeglasses to Vision Health International

For the past several years VHI has been the grateful recipient of eyeglasses and cases that have been provided at no cost by Telephone Pioneers of America in Houston, Texas. This group of volunteers is made up of former employees of Southwestern Bell Telephone Company in Houston, who established an eyeglass bank to help people of developing countries receive the gift of sight. You can donate your used eyeglasses to help others by sending them to:

Eyeglass Bank
1714 Ashland
Houston, Texas 77008



Melinda O'Rourke, MD, screens patients for surgery with a translator by her side.

Future Field Program Dates and Places

Nicaragua
November 13-20, 2004

Peru
Spring 2005

Mexico
Fall 2005

Ecuador
Spring 2006

Come visit us on the internet at www.visionhealth.org

For More Information

If you are an ophthalmologist, anesthesiologist, surgical nurse or technician, or a recovery room nurse and think you would like to volunteer for a VHI mission, please contact

Cindy Goodale at (707) 224-5956

or toll-free at (877) 689-2981.

If you know someone who would like to receive our newsletter or get more information about VHI, please let us know.

We'd like to spread the word.

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