

Through a Patient's Eyes  
Spring Clinic 2016



## SERVICE Above Self

The day begins early on this crisp spring morning at the Rotary-sponsored Guerrero Clinic but the start is a bit slower than typical. The waiting area is filled but not yet at capacity. This relative calm lasts until a bus brings a surge of patients that will set the pace for the rest of the day. Conversations buzz in Spanish, English and even a German dialect spoken by the region's Mennonite people. You can feel some confusion in the air, but soon the patients begin to follow the well-honed process that the clinic has employed for years.



You need only to imagine a very busy rendition of musical chairs. As soon as the necessary paperwork is completed for a patient the preliminary assessments begin. Throughout the process the patients literally move from chair to chair as they progress through the line to the "hot seat". The next stop will be to visit with a doctor.

On this day just after 11am, Mireya and her husband, Guerardo, make their way through the crowded front doors. Mireya is here for a follow up appointment for last year's cataract surgery in her left eye. She also has a cataract in her right eye which is further complicated by a previous retinal detachment. Although it's not been confirmed, she is anticipating another surgery. Guerardo is to have his cataracts evaluated and he's optimistic that he will also receive surgery. For both, their opportunity to have their vision restored wouldn't be possible without the clinic.

Mireya is only 49 and Guerardo is 55. It may seem odd by American standards that such a young couple would both be suffering with the same degenerative eye disease. However, cataracts, often maturing to an advanced stage where the entire lens is white, are not rare in this region of Mexico. Many of the indigent people just like Mireya and Guerardo deal with severe vision loss and even blindness because of this devastating eye disease. Even children come to the Guerrero Clinic for treatment of cataracts. While nutrition may be a factor, the true culprit is more likely the region's altitude and intense UV sun rays at the high elevation of 7,000+ feet above sea level.



Because of the excellent medical care provided at each of the clinic sessions, vision will be restored to many in this remote area of Mexico. Regardless of whether it is eye glasses or cataract surgery, all services are provided free to the patients. The clinic has helped the indigent population of Mexico for over 30 years. It's the longest running active project of its type in the Rotary organization, operating 4 one-week clinics per year. Three of the clinics are for eye and dental needs and one is for plastic surgeries such as cleft palates. During each clinic between 700 and 1,000 patients will be treated and 100 - 250 surgeries will be preformed. This Spring Clinic is no different and Mireya and Guerardo are typical of the thousands of others that have received care here.

And so the couple's process continues as they each read the eye chart with Randall, a volunteer from Chicago on his 5<sup>th</sup> medical mission. James, an optometrist from South Carolina, checks out each of their pupils. James is on his first visit to the Guerrero Clinic but his 10<sup>th</sup> medical mission. Dilation drops are administered by the optical students attending as part of a student volunteer program referred to as VOSH or the Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity. The final step in the assessment process is the auto-refractor with volunteers Bill and Lynn from the Ruidoso Rotary club.



Mireya and Guerardo's gratitude for the care they're receiving is evident at all times and their devotion to one another is even more apparent. They, like most all of the patients at the clinic, continually affirm their appreciation to the clinic volunteers. This, perhaps more than any other aspect, is what makes volunteering at the clinic so rewarding.

The day progresses and by 1:30 Guerardo has been evaluated by the optometrist. His need for surgery is confirmed and he moves on to the scheduling office. Arrangements for his cataract

surgery to be performed the next day are finalized and he'll spend the rest of this day following the efforts to restore Mireya's vision. Her day is far from over.

Guerardo never leaves Mireya's side as she is evaluated to see if she's a candidate for a laser procedure that would be an alternative to surgery. Unfortunately the laser treatment is quickly ruled out. Michael, an optometrist from Illinois and participating in his 5<sup>th</sup> clinic, now finalizes the plans for Mireya to have her second cataract surgery. Both will return in the morning for another long day moving seat by seat through the waiting room as they wait for their turn in surgery.

The couple's 2<sup>nd</sup> day at the clinic begins early and due to the scheduling they spend the day separated by several seats as they wait to go into pre-op. The separation from Mireya is an emotional burden for Guerardo and concern shows on his face. It's clear that he's anxious about being apart from his wife. As the hours of waiting pass, Guerardo is finally moved to pre-op while Mireya waits alone for her turn. It's only a short 2 hours but for the first time during this medical odyssey she appears fragile. Guerardo is clearly her strength. When she moves into pre-op and they are reunited their relief is heartwarming.



Pre-op is humming with all the necessary surgical preparations but is a lively and fun place as well. Work is frequently stopped for a song and a dance performed by the entertaining Mistress of Pre-op, Elsa Branson and her merry band of pre-op nursing volunteers. To work in this part of the clinic a full working knowledge of the Cotton-Eye-Joe and the Macarena are as important as medical skill. Elsa is routinely found waltzing with the patients. Her gentle ministrations help to relax the patients and make their ordeal a little less onerous.

Once into surgery Elsa's waltzing is replaced by the doctor's iPhone playing the Rolling Stones. The ophthalmologist performing Guerardo's surgery isn't an American volunteer, but one of the Mexican doctors who routinely volunteer. Within his surgical area three patients are in various stages of readiness. Guerardo is already undergoing his surgery. Another man is in the room ready to follow. This leaves Mireya, the 3<sup>rd</sup> patient, in a seat outside the surgery room alone but fortunately still very close to her husband.





As Guerardo's surgery is completed Mireya is brought into the surgery room. Although the doctor is initially unaware that he has husband and wife patients he soon realizes that Mireya is anxious to know about her husband. Once he sees her concern his gentle demeanor with Mireya is touching as he reassures her. As Guerardo is led out of the surgery room he stops to place his hand on Mireya's cheek.



Mireya's surgery is more complicated due to the detached retina injury to her eye and it's evident that the doctor and his team are paying close attention to her unique situation.

At the end of this long day, with many instructions for the night ahead and their eyes



swathed in gauze bandages, the couple's son and granddaughter are there to take them home. They will return early the next morning for their post-op appointments.



The third morning finds Guerardo and Mireya at the clinic but this time it is for their post-op appointments. To an observer it may seem unceremonious as the bandages are removed and the gift of sight is restored. That's hardly the case for Mireya and Guerardo. This couple knows how fortunate they are to receive the gift of vision and don't take it for granted. They are only two among thousands living in this region who would live their lives with limited vision or without sight altogether were it not for this clinic and the strong commitment of Rotarians and the medical volunteers who make this a reality.

This spring clinic ends as routinely as the other clinics have over the 30+ years of operation. The volunteers are weary from the countless hours worked, but their hearts are filled with a happiness that only comes from being a part of the true miracles that take place here. As each volunteer prepares to return home, it is with the knowledge that they leave behind the gift of vision.

What is taken home is the truest understanding of *Service Above Self*.

