

North Shore ophthalmologist to travel to El Salvador on medical mission

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Dr. Stuart Sondheimer has been a practicing ophthalmologist and eye surgeon and has participated in five medical missions over the past several years. Levinson Communications International

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Dr. Stuart Sondheimer has been a practicing ophthalmologist and eye surgeon for over 30 years, seeing patients in his Skokie, Deerfield and Park Ridge offices.

But the Wilmette resident is about to travel far beyond the North Shore to treat some patients he's never met before: those in the town of Chalatenango, El Salvador. On February 6, Sondheimer and his wife, Bonnie Lucas, are participating in a medical mission where thousands of men and women will receive eye exams, glasses, and eye surgeries.

"It's challenging, but very satisfying," said Sondheimer, a University of Illinois Medical School graduate who was among the first surgeons in the U.S. to offer surgical correction for nearsightedness, farsightedness, and astigmatism. "When we do surgery in the U.S., we've got the latest systems and tremendous facilities. There, we are doing surgeries under more rustic conditions, so it's a different procedure. We don't have the high-tech equipment, but the results are still excellent."

This isn't the Sondheimers' first medical mission. The two have participated in goodwill trips to Vietnam, Honduras and last year the town of La Libertad, also in El Salvador.

"We saw over 4,500 patients, did many surgeries, and helped a lot of people who would otherwise not be able to see, so it's incredibly gratifying," said Sondheimer, who estimated that in his entire career, he has performed over 10,000 cataract surgeries and 12,000 refractory surgery procedures. "I remember watching a man wake up from surgery, who had been blind and hadn't seen his son for many years. Moments like those make the whole trip worth it."

"The joy on someone's face when you fit them in a pair of glasses and they can read their Bible again is priceless," said Lucas, who is the vice president of technology and data analytics at Oakton Community College and who goes on the trips as a volunteer. "I've had the privilege of being in the surgery center when the bandages come off after cataract surgery and they see their family for the first time in 15 years. It's quite moving."

The mission is organized by Virginia-based Eye Care International, a 20-year-old non-profit organization that brings ophthalmology, optometry, optical services, and ocular prosthetics to poverty-stricken countries around the world. Phil Loar is the former program coordinator and currently the board chair for the organization.

"Without doctors like Dr. Sondheimer, people who need cataract surgery would never get it," said Loar. "People who need simple operations to restore their eyesight would otherwise be blind."

Loar said all the doctors who participate in the missions, including Sondheimer, care about the patients the same way they care about patients in their own practices.

"I've see him consulting with the patients," he said. "He's very considerate, and he's also concerned with making sure the procedure is done without complications."

"We have many blessings in our lives and it's important to find a way to give back," said Lucas. "Stuart has a unique skill that can completely change lives. Bringing lenses and other supplies is part of the mission, but really his surgical skill and time is a gift that no vendor can give."

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