

[Eye surgeon helps restore sight during humanitarian missions](#)

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Before we tag along with local ophthalmologist Dr. Stuart Sondheimer on his humanitarian visits first to Vietnam and more recently to Honduras, it might be best to start with an experience a little closer to home.

Sondheimer, who has always been interested in helping those in need, lived and worked in Arizona from 1983 to 1999 where he would visit Indian reservations and help those with sight problems.

These were people who were “underserved,” he said, living in places “off the beaten path.”

“People we visited weren’t getting any help at all,” said Sondheimer, 59, of Wilmette. “There was one lady in Arizona, and she lived in a tent and she could see absolutely nothing — absolutely nothing. She must have been sitting in that tent for years.”

Sondheimer brought the woman to his hometown of Phoenix and performed surgery under the Arizona Mobile Eye Unit program. He changed this woman’s life, restoring her vision to a point she likely never could have imagined.

For Sondheimer, an ophthalmologist for 30 years who grew up in Evanston and Glencoe, the reward for such work is almost indescribable. He insists he gets as much if not more out of his humanitarian endeavors than do the people he helps.

That might be overstating things just a touch though because the doctor’s efforts have helped people in life-altering ways.

You can see that’s true just by some of the photos he brings home — the joy on some of the faces of his new patients who likely thought they would never see again.

“There are places and there are people in the world who find that things just gets worse and worse and worse and worse and worse and worse,” Sondheimer said. “And they just learn to live with it.”

Those are the people Sondheimer has treated whether they live on a remote Indian reservation in Arizona or a village in Vietnam or a somewhat dangerous area of Honduras.

“They just don’t have the resources to go out and get excellent health care,” he said. “What we do helps multiple generations. When you have the older person who can’t see anything, then often a young grandchild is spending (his or her) life caring for that person.”

Although Sondheimer has always professed interest in humanitarian work — even as far back as when he interned at Evanston Hospital and performed his residency in Madison, Wisc. — it wasn’t until recently that he could participate so extensively.

“I got to a point in my life where my children were grown and out of the house so now I could have the time and the resources to go out and make these trips,” he said.

For his two humanitarian trips over the last few years, he has temporarily left behind his offices in Skokie, Deerfield and Park Ridge to perform eye surgery in worlds and under conditions completely different from his own.

Sondheimer first had to train for the overseas missions because he was to perform surgeries with lower grade equipment than was his practice.

He took courses and visited surgeons and began performing the procedures.

“When you go work with the ophthalmologists from the other countries, we’re teaching them about the things that we do to take care of our patients but then they’re also teaching us about how they take care of their patients with less resources,” he said.

Sponsored by two humanitarian relief organizations — Surgical Eye Expeditions International and Vision Outreach International — Sondheimer’s humanitarian missions have also included delivering important donated equipment and medical supplies to help treat patients in areas where resources can be scarce.

He left for Vietnam in September, 2010 and spent nearly a week performing eye surgery. He was aided by Dr. Lee Tran, a Vietnamese American ophthalmologist born in the United States whose parents were immigrants.

The team consisted of Tran, who spoke Vietnamese, Sondheimer and his wife, Bonnie. Joined by three Vietnamese ophthalmologists, they performed 120 surgeries in only five days.

Sondheimer also lectured to the Vietnamese doctors on modern refractive cataract surgery and consulted about new technologies used in the United States.

He had been scheduled to go to San Pedro Sula, Honduras earlier but a coup made it too unsafe and he had to cancel. He finally traveled there during the first week of March, joining a couple of other doctors as they performed surgery and examined patients. They saw babies who suffered from retrolental fibroplasia, which can result in blindness for infants.

The team in a handful of days restored eyesight for 17 citizens of San Pedro Sula ranging in age from their 20s to 90s.

“These were people who were severely visually impaired but now they can see,” he said.

What especially inspires Sondheimer about these trips is how many different parties come together to make them successful.

American companies give thousands of dollars worth of medical supplies. The physicians pay their own way to travel and stay at hotels. The two sponsorship organizations provide valuable support and resources.

“It’s really a cooperative effort from many, many people from all over the world,” he said. “It’s actually utterly unbelievable. They’re the most amazing trips I’ve ever taken.”

Sondheimer sees countries in ways that most people don’t. There are no tour guides or fancy hotels during his visits. He experiences the culture in a fresh way and meets people from entirely different backgrounds.

“We take the doctors out to eat. They take us out to eat. We talk about what our lives are like. They talk about what their lives are like. We go into an operating room with totally different conditions and different values. We share our perspective and they share their perspective and we all grow and learn. It’s just a beautiful experience.”

It’s for these reasons that Sondheimer insists he’s the lucky one, he’s the one who is blessed.

“The most amazing thing is that in doing this type of work the rewards that I get personally exceed any little thing that I put into going on this trip about a hundredfold,” he said.