

# Eye doc spots need in Central America



*In their Wilmette home are Bonnie and Dr. Stuart Sondheimer, who traveled to El Salvador in February and helped more than 4,000 patients. Alan P. Henry/22nd Century Media*

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Their sight restored by cataract surgery, one man was able to see his mother for the first time in 30 years, while another was at last able to go back to work and a third could once again see his son.

They were among the thousands of villagers near La Libertad in El Salvador who were given the gift of restored or improved sight last month by a team of medical missionaries that included Stuart and Bonnie Sondheimer, of Wilmette.

“The ability to restore sight is an eye doctor’s greatest reward. To do this in a surgical mission trip is wonderful and life changing,” said Stuart, an ophthalmologist who conducted 15 surgeries during the weeklong trip. “One cataract surgery may not change the whole world, but it will change that person’s view of the world forever.”

The medical mission was organized by Eye Care International, a nonprofit humanitarian organization that concentrates on bringing free and low-cost eye care to impoverished areas. The Sondheimers were among 46 United States and Canadian volunteers who examined 4,305 patients, fit 1,928 prescription glasses and 1,918 reading glasses, dispensed 50 artificial eyes, and performed 76 cataract and pterygium surgeries.

Bonnie, who is vice president of technology at Oakton Community College, helped distribute prescription and reading glasses collected by the Lions Club. The missionaries also handed out sunglasses, which can prevent eye problems for people who work outside.

“Most of the people are so appreciative and grateful,” she said.

“One lady said I have nothing to give you but I will pray for you,” said Dr. Sondheimer, who has performed more than 20,000 eye surgical procedures and has offices in Skokie, Deerfield and Park Ridge.

The physicians chose El Salvador because of the staggering poverty and general poor access to health care.

“About 40 percent of the population lives in remote rural areas and it’s not uncommon for people to walk for a week to get to the village to receive eye care that you and I take for granted,” said Dr. Sondheimer. “Common eye problems like cataracts, which are routine procedures here in the U.S., are debilitating tragedies in countries like El Salvador.”

“You can’t help but have a different appreciation for the luxuries of your own life,” Bonnie said.

The Sondheimers were both widowed and married six years ago. Together, they have six children and two grandchildren. The El Salvador trip was their third medical mission. They did one to Honduras in 2012 and another to Vietnam in 2010.

“You want to grow together when you are experiencing this kind of thing. It is a wonderful thing to share,” Bonnie said.