

Wheel Squeals – February 25, 2008

On February 25, 2008 members of the Rotary Club of North Vancouver visited the warehouse of the Third World Eye Care Society in Burnaby, BC. The business for the evening was to sort glasses for distribution to people in need in Third World countries. We were welcomed by Derrick March and Marina Roma-March. Mr. March filled in some background about the organization. The Third World Eye Care Society is a not-for-profit organization that is registered in Ottawa. It is operated entirely by volunteers. The warehouse space has been provided by the Lions Club of Burnaby (Lougheed) who do not charge for the space in the income supplemented housing extra space. The whole operation demonstrates what people can accomplish when working around a wonderful idea - take eyeglasses discarded here and distribute them to people who have a desperate need for glasses but not the means to buy them.



Marina Roma-March and Derrick March

Mr. March pointed out that they had just come back from Central Vietnam. They operate in Central Vietnam because the host organization is in Da Nang. He provided some background by noting that the Fred Hollows Foundation in Australia is the host non-governmental organization. This foundation was one of the first to get into Vietnam after the end of the Vietnam War. (For more information see: <http://www.hollows.org/>). They have been there for about 10 years. Their mandate is to train ophthalmologists to do

cataract surgery. The occurrence of eye cataracts is related principally to sun exposure and diet. Thus they are more common in Asia and Africa where unprotected sun exposure is greater and diets poorer than they are in temperate zones. We are accustomed to people needing cataract surgery in their 60s, 70s and 80s, often after they retire. Where sun is bright and diets poor, cataracts occur when people are in their 50s or 40s and sometimes in their 30s. The effect on the society can be profound. In Canada cataract surgery after retirement can be a quality of life issue. But in Third World countries cataracts can have significant economic impact. Young people are the engine of society. People in their thirties who cannot see are frequently unemployable. They are not a source of family income but a drain on family resources. It is frequently possible to get younger persons working simply by providing them with new glasses. By extension, future economic development is dependent upon projects like this.

Mr. March reflected upon his experiences in Vietnam. As someone going from Canada to Vietnam to help people with vision problems, were your expectations fulfilled? Yes, my expectations were somewhat filled. We did make miraculous changes in some people's lives. He continued that the Vietnamese do not navel gaze about the Vietnam War. They have moved on. There were 3 to 10 million killed when the French and United States were there. Every family lost someone. Everyone has been touched by Agent Orange casualties. The Australians arrived with a kind of eucalyptus which is not affected by Agent Orange and the tree cover is returning. At the same time as one travels around the country you see signage depicting children being blown up by land mines.



Of the work of the 3rd World Eye Care Society – what are you attempting to do? It is a matter of matching resource with need. In B.C. there is a great wealth of volunteers who will work without pay. That includes groups such as Rotary. 50,000 eyeglasses have been fitted and are being worn. When we started out we didn't know what would happen. It has been an awesome experience for the first 12 people who went on the first project. We can make such a major difference in a world that needs our work. Under Pol Pott in Cambodia, if you wore glasses you were executed. On the early trip to Cambodia, the glasses were fitted and then people took them off and put them in a pocket. You never see anyone on the street wearing glasses. The north of Vietnam is controlled by war lords. Mr. March pointed out that these societies tend to collapse. Could we possibly turn back the Chinese economy? China is on its way and Vietnam is following close behind. When Terry McGauley was there 10 years ago, there were remains of the Vietnam War. Now that is all gone. There is more information and personal experiences at: www.twecs.ca

Marina Roma-March, co-founder of the Third World Eye Care Society, provided some other perspectives. When we were starting out, we wanted to help as many people as we could in the way we could. We have come this far because we never knew what the challenges were going to be. We started in a much smaller room than this one and our goals were minimal. Yet, we still hold the same philosophy. Our mission was to get as many eyeglasses out to people in the Third World. Derrick was scientist who gave up his career to become involved in this.

Marina is an optometrist. She is equipped to do the eye examinations. On each of their projects they take at least 3 or 4 optometrist and a couple of opticians. Marina noted that optometrists examine people's eyes, diagnose problems and do prescriptions. Opticians fit frames and fit the glasses on your face.



Marina continued. We just came from Vietnam in November. While we were there, we examined people's eyes and gave away eyeglasses to something like 3800 people in 7 days. One case particularly stands out in my mind. We met a girl about 12 years old. In my office we have a device that can only measure -20, but she was - 25! This means that naturally she cannot see past the bridge of her nose. What could we do? We gave her a pair of minus 10 glasses but that was too strong. As we talked about what we could do for this little girl a remarkable story unfolded.

It turned out that she was in grade 2. She was very small. (When Marina measured out on some shelving she showed that the girl was perhaps 4 feet tall.) Recall that she was 12 years old. We talked to the person who brought her in, a person we took to be her mother. Is this her first eye exam? She lived in a little village and it was a real effort to get her there. The girl's story was remarkable. There was a mother in labour and the baby was not coming. Her husband cut her belly open with a machete. This was the child of that pregnancy. Without medical care, the birth mother died. The woman who took the child in was given a few hundred dollars by some visiting Canadians. As Marina put it, "It was a story of love by the unrelated mother for this orphaned child."

They tried again to fit this little girl with glasses. They started with - 7. When she started scanning, we knew we were making headway. She was not going to school. That was something for the future.

Looking at efforts to provide eyesight worldwide, we knew of cases in Nicaragua where there were no teachers because they could not see. 153 million people world wide are effectively blind because they have no glasses. Most of those people are in Southeast Asia. The economic impact is just now becoming known. We can see it the most basic personal terms. Families have members who are unemployable because their eyesight is poor. People we have given glasses can now see and their family economic condition is improved.

When cataract surgery is done, sometimes the lens is removed and no lens put in its place. Those people must have glasses. Out of the 3 or 4000 people we saw most only require reading or distance glasses. On your next trip you will pass 50,000 pairs distributed to people. Marina is optimistic. We just keep going. There are still lots of people out there who need glasses.

We are a chapter of the Volunteer Optometric Service for Humanity. It is somewhat patterned after Doctors without Frontiers or Engineers without Frontiers. There are 35 chapters around the world. They have been in existence since 1972. See: <http://www.vosh.org/>

Marina summed up the situation with a little anecdote. She has a friend whose mother was afraid of cataract surgery. She was encouraged to contemplate a life without legs. Now contemplate living with sight. After 2 years of refusing the surgery she promptly decided upon surgery.



As Derrick had pointed out, Marina noted that there is a coincidence of volunteers, the perception of recycling as a positive activity, and communications that make us aware of what living conditions are like in poor places. There is something good about involvement in broad circles, something good about meeting Neil, compassion, bonding.

Submitted with respect:
John R. Stuart
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