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A new way to look at things

An ophthalmologist and her son were part of a team that performed eye surgeries in rural Mexico.

By Julie Shaw
Inquirer Suburban Staff

Ana Maria Ramirez's eyes had gradually worsened. At 62, she was nearly blind and couldn't make out her grandchildren's faces.

She couldn't afford a private eye doctor. So she, like others in the state of Zacatecas in central Mexico, traveled to the small town of Jerez de Garcia Salinas in Zacatecas.

A group of eye doctors, on a mission for the California nonprofit group Surgical Eye Expeditions International, was going to be at a small hospital for a few days, providing free exams and operations.

Anita Nevyas-Wallace, an ophthalmologist at Nevyas Eye Associates in Bala Cynwyd, was one of the five doctors. The other four were from Mexico, including the two host doctors, a husband-and-wife team who lived in Jerez.

This was Nevyas-Wallace's first time working in Mexico. She had visited and studied in the country before. Her son, Jonathan Wallace, a senior at Harriton High School, also went on this summer's trip, serving as a surgical assistant.

The experience showed them how advanced surgical conditions are in the United States compared to rural Mexico. But more important, they were able to change the way people see the world around them. Literally.

During the first three of their four days at the hospital, the five eye doctors performed 132 procedures. They stayed another day for follow-up exams. They worked from 8 a.m. to midnight, stopping for little breaks to eat a sandwich or drink water.

Even though they were based at a local hospital, they had to bring their own equipment and supplies.

Nevyas-Wallace, 46, of Penn Valley, and her son brought with them from the United States two boxes full of medicine, eye drops, intraocular lenses (clear lenses that replace the cloudy lenses, or cataracts, removed during surgery), sterile gloves, surgical masks and surgical scrub sponges. Surgical Eye Expeditions, manufacturers and doctors' offices, including Nevyas-Wallace's own, donated the supplies.

The Mexican doctors provided the surgical microscopes and the phacoemulsification machines, used in cataract surgery to break up a cloudy lens.

Jonathan, who spent a month before the trip reading about eye surgery and its related equipment, had never been to Mexico. Unlike his mother, he didn't know Spanish.

But even Nevyas-Wallace learned that not everyone in Mexico speaks Spanish. Some patients spoke the indigenous Indian languages of Nahuatl and Huichol. They had translators with them.

Jonathan, 17, said: "I gained a real appreciation of how good the medical care is in this country... . It was also very moving being able to help these people."

Ramirez, the grandmother, was one of those patients. She had cataracts in both eyes.

Nevyas-Wallace was able to remove the cataract in just one eye. With so many patients in need, and limited time and resources, the doctors decided to perform surgery on one eye per patient, even if the person had problems with both eyes. This way, they could help more people see better.

The day after her surgery, Ramirez sat in the exam room waiting for Nevyas-Wallace to remove the bandage from her

right eye. She looked nervous.

Nevyas-Wallace took off the bandage. Ramirez smiled. She looked out the window and said, "*Las hojas* [the leaves]."

It was the first time, in many years, that Ramirez could see the individual green leaves. Before, a tree was one big blur.

She looked at her hands, noticing the wrinkles and dark tones.

"She looked at our faces as if she hadn't seen faces for a while," Nevyas-Wallace said. Another doctor was also in the room. "She cried. She blessed us. She hugged us."

Contact suburban staff writer Julie Shaw at 610-313-8212 or jshaw@phillynews.com.

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