Optometry Mission Trip To Mexico

This past interim Dr. John Ubels and Dr. Larry Gerbens, a retired ophthalmologist who works in Calvin’s development office, led a team of 12 pre-healthcare and nursing students on a service-learning trip to Mexico to provide eye exams and glasses to people who do not have adequate access to eye care. Also joining the team for the first week was Dr. Ralph De Haan, a Calvin alum optometrist from Pella, Iowa. The group from Calvin teamed up with missionaries Scott and Marcia Geurink of Christian Reformed World Missions, who facilitated setting up clinics at 7 churches in Tijuana and San Quintin, Mexico. The Lions Club of Grand Rapids provided over 1500 pairs of used glasses for the trip. After examining the patients, the students fit them with glasses that most closely matched their visual needs. The temporary clinics served an average of 130 people per day, proving to be a very useful service to people with a variety of refractive errors, including some little children with esotropia. Many older people simply needed reading glasses, and some stated that they were thrilled that they would be able to read the Bible again. The team’s blog, written by Calah Metz and Tyler Mink, reported, “One of our first patients was a child who jumped up and down when she received her glasses- these are the moments we live for.” Many school children had an eye exam for the first time and received the important good news that they had normal vision. In addition to providing glasses for hundreds of people, the location of the clinics in churches also opened up the opportunity for the missionaries to build relationships with families in their neighborhoods. As described in the comments below, the mission trip provided an important cross-cultural experience for students and leaders alike as they interacted with the local community. For a more detailed account of the experience, check out their blog.

Student Reflections from the Mexico Trip:

Andrew DeVries, SR biology major, pre-medicine: “With the addition of my public health minor, I’ve been looking towards serving medically in areas that are under served. This trip, for me, was an opportunity to take what I’ve been learning in class, and take that passion into a real world situation. What I came out with though, was a lot more than I was hoping. On the medical side, I learned how exciting and rewarding working with a group of people that really need help is. On the spiritual side, I was able to grow a lot during the trip. While the people in Mexico have economic poverty, they were not spiritually poor. The community that we saw in each of the clinics, when we played soccer with the locals, etc. was amazing to say the least.”

Aaron Bughagraef, JR biology and Spanish major: “Originally before the trip, when I thought of poverty, I always thought about those who couldn’t afford adequate food or shelter or clothing. But I failed to realize that these people who were struggling with their money were so rich in other areas of their lives. Poverty is not just a one-sided issue when talking about money, but rather can refer to the spiritually poor and the poverty of community. When interacting with the Mexican people, I saw how their sense of community and togetherness with those around them was so much stronger than what we experience here in the States. Not only were they some of the kindest and most caring people I have ever met, treating everybody with respect, but they were also some of the most spiritually devout believers I have ever come across. The mission of the trip was to distribute eye glasses to those in Mexico who needed help to see, and we did a lot of that, but we didn’t predict the effect that would be had on us as well, simply from spending a couple of weeks with the Mexican people.”

By John Ubels and Alanna Van Der Woerd