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Haiti 2013 - Project on the island of “La Gonave”: A true success story!

Dre Francine Lavallée, optometrist
February 02, 2013

The team of IRIS Mundial volunteers went to the island of La Gonave in Haiti for one week **on January 9, 2013** to provide eye care to the community of “Anse-à-Galets” — the project was a great success. Last October, an exploratory mission confirmed that the island’s needs for medical attention were great. Over 130 000 Haitians live on this isolated island in conditions of extreme poverty. The island is located two hours by boat off the coast of Haiti. As a result, help comes infrequently, health services are almost inexistent and people do not have access to any eye care. The electricity and fuel supplies are scarce and unreliable. People live simply; getting around by walking or biking. We had the privilege of meeting a very welcoming and friendly community.



An efficient team of volunteers

It is on a sailboat that IRIS Mundial Team reached the port of “Anse-à-Galets”. After lugging baggage and many boxes of equipment, eyeglasses and ophthalmic medication; the team moved into the premises of the “Wesleyan” Hospital in order to provide eye care to the community. This is the only health care facility on the island. A dynamic team of thirty Canadian and Haitian volunteers, ophthalmologists, optometrists, opticians, assistants and nurses worked tireless long hours while never giving up their smile. The effective management of entries and lineups at each station allowed for more than 1700 patients, among the poorest of the island, to receive a thorough eye exam. Ophthalmic medication and/or prescriptions for glasses were given to those in need; thus, many received brand new glasses courtesy of our generous ophthalmic suppliers of frames and lenses. A pair of sunglasses was given to each patient examined. Thirty patients regained their eyesight following operations for cataracts or pterygiums.





A new life begins for Asefi

Asefi will forever remember the IRIS Mundial team that came to the island of “La Gonave” in Haiti. The young 22 year-old woman suffering from diabetes, developed cataracts and lost her sight at the age of eight. Andrée, head nurse and volunteer, recounts the events: “*The day after her cataract extraction surgery, the operating room staff was anxious. During her first post-op visit, the ophthalmologist removed the dressing to proceed with the eye exam. The young girl was seeing blurry at first, and then her face lit up. She recognized the voices of the nurses and as they were approaching her she started describing their clothes: ‘You have a skirt with pleats, you’re wearing a long necklace and you’re dressed in white!’ She saw her mother nearby and smiled. Everyone cried tears of joy and happiness; a new life begins for her.*”

Towards a permanent change on the island of “La Gonave”

This particular project has improved the quality of life of many people by restoring or improving their eyesight. Furthermore, it has raised the awareness of this isolated population with regards to the vision problems in their community. The statistics generated from data collected during this mission will allow us to better understand the ocular problems of this population. We already knew that glaucoma was a disease endemic in Haiti. Cases of blindness caused by glaucoma or cataracts are all too frequent: unfortunately, these undiagnosed patients often become an additional burden to their families. A simple pair of reading glasses can allow a mother or a father to continue to earn a decent living. Thanks to this project, IRIS Mundial plans to establish a permanent program, similar to the successful one already in place in Labrousse, for the prevention and fight against blindness. This program would allow the entire population of the island to have access to year-round quality eye care such as: eye exams, ophthalmic medication, eyeglasses and surgeries.



As told to us after the project by Dr. Jean-Pierre Tchang, optometrist, founder and CEO of IRIS Mundial: “*I think we have had a significant impact on the island of La Gonave. I hope that our work will inspire the National Committee for the Prevention of Blindness and the Haitian Society of Ophthalmology in their efforts to reduce blindness in Haiti*”.

On our way back, while traveling in the truck that took us to the boat, we could see people waving at us; smiling proudly, wearing their sunglasses and saying: ‘Goodbye!’”

To see on YouTube!

Marco Pelletier, videographer, followed the IRIS Mundial Team in Haiti throughout the entire trip. See the amazing video he produced— beautiful, moving... <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gu3WZhOTi5A>

A special Thanks to our partners

The continued success of all the IRIS Mundial Missions is based on the contributions of many individuals, companies and organizations. We are sincerely grateful to the management and staff of the “**Wesleyan**” Hospital in “**Anse-à-Galets**” for their warm welcome and support; the **National Committee for the Prevention of Blindness (Haiti)** for its support and logistics and finally, the **Haitian Society of Ophthalmology**. Thank you to the **Alcon Foundation** (Fort Worth, USA); **Collaboration Santé Internationale**; **Optic Laboratories Nikon**; **Oculab Optic Laboratories**; **COS and Visionframe**. Of course, a special thanks to the owners and staff of the 170 offices of IRIS, the Visual Group across Canada for supporting our projects and to all those who directly or indirectly contribute to our projects. Your continued support means the world to us, and allows us to keep going!



Congratulations to IRIS Mundial volunteers who participated in this project:

Ophthalmologists: Carmelle Lucien Guerrier (Haïti), Brigitte Hudicourt (Haïti), Frantz Large (Haïti)

Optometrists: Mireille Barras (La Pocatière), Marie-Carole Begin (St-George), Dominique Grenier (Canton de Hatley), Francine Lavallée (Blainville), Pierre Martin (Les Cèdres), Jean-Pierre Paradis (Lac Mégantic), Jean-Pierre Tchang (La Pocatière)

Opticians: Élisabeth Duncan (Gatineau), Manon Pelletier (St-Lambert)

Assistants: Michèle Taschereau (Lachute), Maxi Marcelin (Haïti), Nadia Mares (Haïti)

Nurses: Miriame Cadet (Haïti), Andrée Coulombe (Charlesbourg), Manon Perron (Val d'or) Murielle Poulain (Levis)

Video producer: Marco Pelletier (St-Pamphile)

Other volunteers: Gérald Bourgault (St-Pamphile), Gérald Carrier (Magog), Sylvie Grenier (Longueuil), Nathalie Jutras (La Durantaye), Richard Perron (Lachute)

Students: Marie-Dominique Boucher (St-Lambert), Alexandra Houle-Boivin (Levis), Virginie Mineault (Gatineau), Gabrielle Tchang (La Pocatière)



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