



INTERNSHIP IN HAITI FOR UNIVERSITY OF MONTREAL OPTOMETRY STUDENTS

Five optometry students from the University of Montreal and their internship supervisor, Dr. Nicolas Sylvestre, Optometrist, travelled to Limbé, Haiti for a week-long internship (Sept. 22nd to 30th) alongside the members of the Programs for the Prevention and Fight against Blindness (PPFB).

This is a second initiative between IRIS Mundial and the *Université de Montréal* School of Optometry fourth-year optometry students creating an opportunity to participate in a credited internship. The success of the 2017 internship pilot project served as a catalyst for the creation of a second group of interns that will be heading off to Haiti next February. This project was made possible thanks to: Dr. Benoit Tousignant, Optometrist, internship supervisor and assistant professor at the school of optometry as well as *Le Centre d'Éducation et de Développement intégré-Village de l'Espoir (CEDI-VE)*, partner of IRIS Mundial since 2013.

As told to us by Pascal Desjardins: "What struck me once is all the smiling I witnessed day in and day out; children, adults, seniors, everybody is always smiling."

THE RELEVANCE OF AN INTERNSHIP IN ACADEMIC TRAINING

Throughout the week, Pascal Desjardins, Claudie Houle-Salvail, Roxanne Lefebvre, Amélie Larouche and Roxanne Arsenault familiarized themselves with the key concepts necessary for providing visual care in this country with limited resources, in addition to the diagnoses & treatment of the main eye issues encountered according to their competencies.



This internship has allowed them to better understand how the socio-economic and political aspects of a country can impact the visual health of its people and the solutions that are possible.

"We were pleasantly surprised that there is not much myopia in Haiti, although I have seen cases of cataracts so advanced where the patient only saw "the movement of my hand". It is with great sadness that I realized that these patients did not possess the necessary resources. This program is sorely needed in this region to allow them access to the required care!" - Roxanne Arsenault.

It is with great enthusiasm that the students participated in this stage for which the objective was to apply the knowledge learned in the optometry program to the realities of an environment very different from the university classrooms and optometry clinics in Quebec. Thus, during this internship week packed with two mobile clinics; one in a remote area during which 56 patients were examined and the other where 80 students received eye exams in an elementary school. Forty-five complete eye exams were also given during an optometry day organized at the clinic.

"It's incredible what a pair of glasses can do! The before/after numbers in terms of visual acuity spoke volumes, but their reactions spoke even louder. The surprise and the smile on their face when they realized they could read every last letter on the eye chart. It gave us great pleasure to bring positive change and impact; however little." - Claudie Houle-Salvail.

Much to the joy of their Haitian colleagues, the optometry students created training and theory workshops to help them improve their eye screening capabilities. Finally, the group paid a courtesy visit to the *Vision Plus* visual clinic in *Cap-Haitien* where program-financed eye surgeries take place.

APPRECIATION OF THE EXPERIENCE

Again this year, the mission went well and seems to have been a success with the interns despite the few unforeseen events along the way—all par for the course when overseas. Many took the time to share their appreciation and gratefulness for the wonderful experiences shared in this Central American country.



Claudie Houle-Salvail's testimony for example, forces us to reflect on the fast-paced lifestyle of most: "Here in Quebec we are slaves to our phones; we were stressed prior to our departure due to our lifestyles centered around work and study. Once there, we changed gear to adapt to the Haitian rhythm and lifestyle, to de-stress in order to slow down and enjoy the present moment by breaking free from all technology."

For his part, Dr. Nicolas Sylvestre testified to how grateful and enthusiastic the members of the permanent program were to welcome the interns. "I was mentioning to Elvie, the coordinator of the Limbé program, how difficult it is to try to do and teach everything in one week no matter how much we want to. She answered: "Oh don't you worry! The team understood everything the first time...they just want you to come back..."

Finally, the five students and their supervisor returned to Canada full of memories from this rewarding week-long experience with the Haitian people. During the last few weeks, they conveyed their passion and anecdotes to the next batch of students already restless to take off next February!

