



**IN 2021,  
IRIS MUNDIAL  
CELEBRATES  
ITS 20TH YEAR  
OF EXISTENCE**



# THE BIRTH OF IRIS MUNDIAL

By Julie Roegiers, General Manager

In June 2001, thanks to the visionary and committed spirit of Dr. Jean-Pierre Tchang, Optometrist, our beautiful organization, IRIS Mundial, officially came into being. For 20 years, caring volunteers have supported this organization to help those in need to better see the world.

In 1997 Jean-Pierre carried out his first mission in Honduras. He did not have to think long before accepting the offer to leave: he did not know the country but saw an excellent opportunity to make a difference and fulfill a dream he had had since childhood: to help others. His parents had often told him about a great project in Uganda, a clinic where they wanted to go and work when they retired. And Jean-Pierre had begun to dream then.

Following this first experience, he was asked to contribute to the foundation Optometrists without Borders organization, and it was under this banner that he began to organize his own projects. But he soon realized he needed to create an organization that would better suit his vision. He sought out the collaboration of his friend, Dr. Francis Jean, president of IRIS, The Visual Group (1990) Inc. This is how IRIS Mundial came into being, and a long and successful collaboration with its main partner, IRIS, The Visual Group, was started.

«At first, we were just distributing prescription glasses, but that didn't solve all the problems. One of the major problems encountered is cataracts. We, therefore, decided to offer cataract surgeries as well», Jean-Pierre Tchang tells us. Very quickly, IRIS Mundial began to work on the long-term sustainability of its projects: «One of the things I am most proud of with IRIS Mundial is that we provided training for professionals. In all the missions we have participated in, whether in Africa, Peru or Haiti, we have always collaborated with local professionals. We have done a lot of training in surgical techniques, in examination techniques», Jean-Pierre Tchang adds. But he wanted to do even more and avoid creating dependency on one-time projects carried out by IRIS Mundial volunteers. He wanted to create permanent clinics by training local staff: «we wanted to make people as autonomous as possible.» This is how IRIS Mundial's Program for the Prevention and Fight against Blindness (PPFB) began.

*“It's often when I'm busiest at work that I want to go on a mission, to refocus on what is essential”*

— Dr. Annie Moreau



## VOLUNTEERS AT THE HEART OF THE ORGANIZATION

For more than 20 years, volunteers have contributed to IRIS Mundial's success and have helped the most disadvantaged to better see the world. Thanks to them and the work of many partners worldwide, IRIS Mundial has been able to help more than 93,500 people! Some of the organization's longest-standing volunteers have been looking back on their experience. They have shared their memories and anecdotes, their impressions and motivation for giving their time and money to help people they had never met before.

Volunteering for IRIS Mundial has given meaning to their work and enabled them to share their experience and expertise to help as many people as possible. They have made a difference. It has offered them new challenges and a chance to share their good fortune with others. These are some of the things that motivate volunteers to get involved with IRIS Mundial. And many of them repeat the experience several times, as Dr. Jacques Samson so aptly emphasizes: «if we accept one first mission, we are done for! Shortly after our return, we start to think about the next one».

Awareness of other realities, human experience, meeting extraordinary people, the emotional impact, returning to basics, getting in touch with the humanitarian in oneself, nourishing the soul: here is a small sample of the many benefits that missions have brought to IRIS Mundial volunteers over time.



Their experience on a mission helps many volunteers put things into perspective, to «put values back in the right place» (Élisabeth Duncan) and come back transformed. For some people, these experiences have been triggers in their life choices, as Dr. Benoit Tousignant relates: «for me, I can say that IRIS Mundial was a turning point in my life. This is what prompted me to study public/global health. From there, my career took on a whole new dimension and allowed me to work in Papua New Guinea and other developing countries; then back in Montreal, to focus on the health of less well-served populations (First Nations, prisoners, people experiencing homelessness, etc.). IRIS Mundial has been a huge catalyst».

*“Doing missions like this, you either like it or you don’t. For me, this was decisive. I got a tattoo on my heart, I can’t do without it”*

— Élisabeth Duncan

## MEMORIES OF MISSIONS

The volunteers have a multitude of memories, anecdotes and poignant moments to share. Dr. Jacques Samson remembers a particularly striking moment following the operation of an 18-year-old young man who had been blind for several years due to cataracts: “his brother took 2 days off to pick him up in the mountains (his village). He had never seen his brother’s children. The Saturday morning before our departure, removing his bandage, the 18-year-old started to cry when he saw his nephews for the first time”.

Good preparation before a mission is essential so that volunteers can better understand the experience they are going to have. They are sometimes confronted with incredibly moving situations; as was the case for Gérald Bourgault: “in the evening, I walked around the site where the mission was hosted, which was a refuge for single-parent women. A woman pregnant with twins, two days off giving birth, asked me to take her children with me, hoping they would have everything in Canada”. The missions are very challenging, both mentally and physically, and there can be health challenges. Dr. Lyne Paré, mission doctor, remembers a mission to Peru in 2005: “my fondest memory is my mission in Huari, at altitude. It was also the mission I worked the most on. Almost all the volunteers were sick, and some quite seriously. Every noon, after consultations at the hospital, I would go back and forth to the monastery where we were staying to take care of the sick and bed-ridden volunteers”.

A mission that brings eye care professionals to disadvantaged regions is often very successful, and thousands of people are expected to receive an eye exam and/or surgery. Dr. Jean-

François Joly remembers a striking moment he experienced during his first mission to Peru, in Huaraz, in 2001: “On the first morning, when the group arrived at the workplace, people had been in the street for several hours, it was raining, and everyone was praying for us, it was extremely moving.”



*“I believe that the first mission you participate in is the most decisive and the most striking because everything is new. We have to adapt quickly to living conditions, smells, difficulties in communicating with people, and new ophthalmological or optometric conditions that we have never seen before. We must also understand that sometimes, unfortunately, we cannot help as we would like. At this moment, it is heartbreaking to see the disappointment in these people who expected so much from us...”*

— Dr. Éline Giasson

# THANKS TO OUR PARTNERS AND VOLUNTEERS!



Volunteers are often well rewarded with smiles, immense joy and incredibly moving moments. Élaïne Anctil remembers a mission where she had brought one of her pairs of glasses: «my eyesight had deteriorated, and I, therefore, had to change glasses. Jean-Pierre Tchang examined a young girl with myopia with almost the same prescription as mine (I am very short-sighted and have undergone various operations). I handed the glasses to her and adjusted them for her. I will never forget the emotion we experienced! With tears in my eyes, I gave this young girl a big hug. She was very moved to see for the first time! I couldn't imagine all the hardships she'd been through before».

These are some of the many memories, happy or sad, which will remain engraved forever in the memory of our volunteers: «the various IRIS Mundial missions in which I participated will stay with me as unforgettable memories. I know that we have left our mark and that thanks to our efforts, there are several villages where the blind can still see the sun» (Andrée Coulombe).

Since the start of IRIS Mundial, more than 300 volunteers have taken part in the numerous missions organized (24 one-time projects and 22 training missions).

IRIS Mundial and the volunteers who testified would like to thank Dr. Jean-Pierre Tchang for his commitment and dedication, as well as the many IRIS Mundial partners without whom all this great work could never have been done!

*“The success of these missions is due to Dr. Jean-Pierre Tchang. He was the conductor. He left his mark across the world and also in our hearts”*

*— Liette Fortin*

Thank you to these volunteers for their testimony:

## **Jean-Pierre Tchang**

(30 missions to his credit with IRIS Mundial)

**Andrée Coulombe** (9 missions, the first in 2004 in Peru)

**Annie Moreau** (10 missions, the first in 2000 in Mexico)

**Benoît Tousignant** (5 missions, the first in 2000 in Mexico)

**Élaïne Anctil** (6 missions, the first in 2000 in Mexico)

**Élaïne Giasson** (7 missions, the first in 2001 in Peru)

**Élisabeth Duncan** (9 missions, the first in 2004 in Peru)

**Gérald Bourgault** (6 missions, the first in 2004 in Benin)

**Jacques Samson** (9 missions, the first in 2004 in Benin)

**Jean-François Joly** (6 missions, the first in 2001 in Peru)

**Liette Fortin** (6 missions, the first in 2004 in Benin)

**Lyne Paré** (13 missions, the first in 2002 in Peru)

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A DIFFERENCE! THANK YOU!**

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