

Volunteers help restore eyesight for many

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One hundred residents of the city of Morelia in Michoacán, Mexico, can see clearly now due, in part, to the efforts of four members of the Rotary Club of Goleta.

Evelyn Senn, Jay Wright, Catherine Remak and the group's leader, Martin Senn, traveled to Morelia in February on a mission to facilitate free eye operations for locals suffering from cataracts.

The group worked in conjunction with Camelinas, an all-woman Rotary club in Morelia, and Surgical Eye Expeditions International, a nonprofit that works to restore eyesight and prevent blindness for disadvantaged people.

Mr. Senn, a six-year member of the club, said the operations drastically improve the quality of life for the patients, many of whom remained nearly blind for years because they could not afford surgery.

"It gives people back their independence and the ability to enjoy their life," he said.

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A volunteer doctor prepares to operate on a patient's cataract.

COURTESY PHOTO

The Dr. Miguel Silva General Hospital in Morelia, where the surgeries were performed, annually treats thousands of the city's poorest and most underprivileged residents.

When Goleta Rotary Club members contacted their sister club Camelinas to discuss how to best assist Morelia's residents, they decided on providing cataract surgeries.

"It's a fairly simple operation and they didn't have the capacity and the money to do it, so that's how that got started," Mr. Senn said.

For the past five years, a group from the Rotary Club of Goleta has helped transport necessary medical supplies to the hospital in Morelia, where several local doctors volunteer to perform the surgeries for free.

To assure that the doctors treat as many residents as possible, each patient is only eligible for surgery on one eye. The procedure to remove the cataracts lasts approximately 15 minutes and has a 90 percent success rate, Mr. Senn said.

The most rewarding part of his work, Mr. Senn said, and what has made him participate in consecutive mission trips, is being able to witness the transformative effects of restoring a person's eyesight.

"You realize that what you're doing is you are dramatically changing somebody's life and that's just an incredible feeling," he said. "We had a completely blind elderly woman that ... just walked out of the hospital on her own; didn't even look back, she was out of there."

Through a grant from Rotary International, the Goleta club was able to donate a cataract surgery machine to Morelia's hospital this year that will allow doctors to perform twice the number of eye surgeries throughout the year.

The club also is helping the hospital raise funds for a \$35,000 microscope that can detect cervical cancer in its early stages.

For Mr. Senn, helping people remains his top priority.

"I feel a strong urge to just help and this is one way that I've been able to do that" he said.

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