

VOSH New York

December 2010 Mission: Beirut, Lebanon

(In Collaboration with SEE International and INMA Foundation)

After several years of participating in VOSH missions, Larah and I finally decided that 2010 was the year we would lead our own optometric trip. While volunteering on a VOSH-New York mission in Lima, Peru in March of last year, we had the good fortune to be joined by Dr. Janak Shah from Mumbai, India. Dr. Shah was working in the Peruvian military hospital alongside us performing free cataract surgeries. It was here that we first learned about SEE International and his long established relationship with Robert Pilgrim and INMA Foundation in Beirut, Lebanon. Janek spoke so highly of his past experiences, he convinced us to join him in collaboration on his next trip there later that December.

We also met Dr. Anshu Chandra, another long-time VOSH New York member, on the Lima mission and she instantly agreed to join us. Janak put us in touch with Robert Pilgrim, the executive director of INMA Foundation. INMA is an organization started in 1987 that helps provide disadvantaged communities of Lebanon with empowerment, education and tools for



reconciliation. After some initial correspondence, the groundwork was laid and the dates were finalized. VOSH-New York, SEE International, and INMA Foundation would all be working together toward a meaningful partnership.

The next step was recruiting more volunteers. After posting the mission details on the VOSH International website, we quickly had some replies. Two Canadian optometrists, Sarah Morris and Nohad Teliani were the firsts to sign on. We were even more thrilled when we found out that Nohad was of Lebanese descent, fluent in Arabic, and would be bringing her father, Khaled, to help as well. Sarah would also bring her mother, Catherine, and her sister, Karen. Rounding out the team was Joanna Wen, an optometry student at SUNY College of Optometry.

On the day of our travel to Lebanon, we were all scheduled to connect in Paris, where the entire group would meet for the first time and fly to Beirut together. Unfortunately, this was also the same day as an enormous blizzard across Northern Europe. The snow storm wrecked havoc on our flights and baggage, and Larah and I got stuck overnight in Berlin. Fortunately, the rest of the group made it, but by the time they exited the airport in Beirut, they were short two optometrists and eleven bags of luggage. Between bags being lost in routing and some issues with customs, the majority of our optometric and surgical

equipment, drugs, and donated glasses were now missing. Little did we know how much work it would take getting them back.

The next four days of clinic were arranged by Robert and INMA. Robert, along with his wife Harriet and son Robert are originally from Holland and have been living in Beirut for several years. While Robert had been running the daily activities of the organization, Jamie Snider, a Texas native, was assigned as our INMA project coordinator. Between Jamie and the Pelgrims, an unbelievable amount of planning had been done. They were absolutely instrumental in organizing the groundwork that makes clinics like ours possible. Everything from transportation, clinic space, interpreters, community outreach, patient selection, and cultural education were taken care of. Without them, our mission would have been hopeless.

The first day of our clinic was in the Kind Words Center, a community center located in the heart of the Bourj El-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp. Bourj El-Barajneh is one of 12 refugee camps in Lebanon officially recognized by the United Nations General Assembly. The camps were originally established after the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict and are now home to more than 400,000 registered refugees, many of whom have been residing in the camps for over 3 generations. Their plight is truly dismal and steeped in more than 60 years of conflict and overwhelming complex politics.



As Larah and I were still trying to make it out of Berlin's snow covered airport, the rest of the team saw over 150 patients that first day. Although it was less than we were hoping for, it was quite an achievement given how short handed we were. Plus, we were still missing the majority of our equipment. We were finally able to get to Beirut that evening and meet Robert and Anshu at the airport. After some heated debate between our Ministry of Health contact and the customs agents, we managed to get some of our missing luggage out of holding. That evening at the hotel, Larah and I got to meet the rest of the group and we all had a brief meeting to discuss the next day's work.

On our second day, we returned to Kind Words Center and managed to see over twice the patients as the day before. I have to admit, our first impressions of the camp left us a little intimidated. From our bus drop-off point, we had to walk through several narrow alleys of cramped housing. The poverty of the neighborhood was in stark contrast to the luxury high rise apartments and upscale shopping malls of nearby areas. We had read a lot about the camps prior to our trip, and security was always a concern. In the end however, our friends from INMA made everyone feel comfortable, and for the most part, our patients were warm and generous. It was an eye-opening experience that few Westerners get a chance to see first hand.

On our third day, we moved our clinic into the Mohammed Khalid Social Foundation Clinic. This hospital was in a different part of Beirut and serves a diverse population of

patients. We set up of optometric clinic a large room and immediately got to work. As the bulk of group worked to exam over 250 patients, Anshu and I were busy performing cataract screenings to identify enough patients to keep Janak and his wife, Preeta, busy with surgeries later in the week.

Day number four brought us to yet another completely different neighborhood. The Life Center in Bourj Hammoud, Beirut is a community center, school, and clinic for the Armenian population of Beirut. Here we started off the day with a vision screening for the entire school. We identified many children with significant uncorrected prescriptions and other with vision problems. The afternoon brought many more adult patients and we all worked like crazy to see as many people as we could.

In the evening after a full day at the Life Center, our group was invited to the home of Samir and Sophie Kreidieh, the founders of INMA, for a party with several people from their organization, along with friends and family. It was set in their eloquent penthouse apartment at the top of a residential building a short walk from our hotel. After some short speeches and words of thanks to everyone involved with the mission, we were treated to an unbelievable feast complete with genuine Lebanese hospitality.



The next morning, as most of the group started a few days of post-mission leisure time, Larah and I started off the day getting thoroughly lost with our taxi driver. After many poor attempts of communicating our desired destination, we finally arrived at the Mohammed Khalid Social Foundation Clinic where Janak and Preeta Shaw were finishing up their second day of cataract surgeries. It was a great feeling to see many of the patients we screened just a few days earlier having these sight restoring operations.

After a few more days exploring Beirut and the surrounding countryside (with Richard Pilgrim acting as our veteran tour guide), we ready to head home. We came away from our trip after seeing Beirut as an incredibly diverse city, filled with unique ethnic groups, religions, and cultures, all living side by side in a precarious balance. We were only to glad to meet its people and provide them with some basic eye care.

Thanks again to each and all of you who had a hand in helping.

Team Co-Leaders:
Dr. Larah Alami
Dr. Rocco Robilotto

Mission Details:

Locations:

Center Kind Words, Bourj El-Barajneh Palestinian Camp, Beirut – December 3&4, 2010
Mohammed Khalid Social Foundation Clinic, Qouzai, Beirut – December 5, 2010
Life Center, Bourj Hammoud (Armenian), Beirut – December 6, 2010

Patient Numbers:

Optometric Exams: 850
Glasses Donated: approximately 600
Cataract Screenings: 150
Cataract surgeries: 67
Other ophthalmic surgeries: 2

Thanks to our complete VOSH-NY Team:

Dr. Larah Alami (VOSH team co-leader) Dr. Anshu Chandra
Dr. Rocco Robilotto (VOSH team co-leader)Dr. Sarah Morris
Dr. Nohad Teliani Mr. Khaled Teliani
Ms. Joanna Wen Ms. Catherine Morris
Ms. Karen Morris

Thanks to all key organizers and leaders from SEE International and INMA:

Dr. Janak Shah, SEE International, Affiliate Surgeon, Mumbai, India
Dr. Preeta Shah, SEE International, Affiliate Surgeon, Mumbai, India
Dr. Julius Shulman, SEE International, Affiliate Surgeon, New York
Robert Pelgrim, Executive Director, INMA Foundation
Jamie Snider, Project Coordinator, INMA Foundation
Harriet Pelgrim
Richard Pelgrim
Anna Pelgrim
Sandra Pelgrim
Julie Davidson
Hikmat Staiittieh
Imaan Arabi
Najah Nasser
Huda Nasabi
Suheir Adlieh
Marwan Asmar
Mohammed Jammal

Mouaan Jabri
Rosette Mansour
Sally Mansour
Marvin Mansour
Natalie Kreidieh
Mohammed Snounou

Lodging:

35 Rooms Hotel, Hamra District, Beirut, Lebanon

Supplies and donations:

Alcon
Heine
Reichert

Thanks to all of you that made it possible for another successful optometric mission for VOSH-New York