Background

From August 16-24, 2014, a team of volunteers from the Outreach Division at the John A. Moran Eye Center (JMEC), along with Senator Rand Paul, MD, performed an Outreach Medical Eye Camp (OMEC) in Salamá, a small town in the Baja Verapaz region of Guatemala.

While Guatemala has a total of 242 ophthalmologists for its population of approximately 15 million, only two of the doctors reside in rural Baja Verapaz—an area home to almost 800,000 people. As is common in developing countries, most medical professionals, including ophthalmologists, live in the countries’ largest cities, leaving few (if any) options for medical care to those living outside of city limits.

Senator Rand Paul, MD, R-Kentucky, an ophthalmologist and possible GOP presidential contender in 2016, asked to join the Moran’s OMEC to Guatemala per a recommendation from the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery (ASCRS). When he asked the organization to suggest a group he should join for an outreach mission, JMEC was at the top of the list. “The Moran Eye Center has one of the strongest international ophthalmology departments and has tremendous expertise in organizing and conducting sight-restoring missions around the world. We recommended them to Senator Paul because they have a seasoned team and a successful model for humanitarian work in the developing world,” said David Chang, MD, International Committee Chair, ASCRS.

The Hope Alliance, a nonprofit organization based in Park City, Utah, also joined the mission to Guatemala. The Hope Alliance distributes eyeglasses and medical care to those in need in the developing world.

This trip was the first of many that Moran’s Outreach Division will make to Guatemala. The team, invited to work in the country by organizations such as the Guatemala-China Lions Club, the Lions Club Eye Hospital Salamá, and the Municipality of Baja Verapaz, will return at various times over the next five years. In keeping with its model of sustainable eye care, Moran physicians will host Guatemalan ophthalmologists in Salt Lake City for International Observerships, so that they can learn new surgical techniques and skills to take back to their hospitals in Guatemala.

The Team

MORAN EYE CENTER VOLUNTEERS
- David Bachman
- Karen Bachman
- Betsy Bradley, RN
- Carolyn Chappell, RN
- Alan Crandall, MD
- Heidi Furlong
- Roger Furlong, MD
- Abraham Granados, Outpatient Services Specialist
- Holly Kersich, COA
- Tara Kisow, Outreach Division Program Coordinator
- Susan MacDonald, MD
- Lori McCoy, COT
- Jeff Pettey, MD
- Melinda Rogers, University of Utah Communications Specialist
- Lisa Williamson, RN
- Michael Yei, Outreach Division Manager

MORAN PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS
- Abbott Medical Optics
- AKORN Pharmaceuticals
- Alcon
- Allegan
- Charles Barr, MD
- Don Bell, CEO, ASCRS
- David Chang, MD, International Committee Chair, ASCRS
- John Downing, MD
- Guatemala-China Lions Club
- The Hope Alliance
- Lions Club Eye Hospital Salamá
- Mobius Therapeutics
- Nancy McCann, Government Relations, ASCRS / ASOA
- OcuSOFT
- Senator Rand Paul, MD
- University of San Carlos, Guatemala, Translator Program
DAY BY DAY

AUGUST 17, 2014

After a four-hour bus ride through the winding roads from Guatemala City to Salamá, the Moran team reached the Lions Club Eye Hospital and wasted no time reconfiguring its small operating room to accommodate a weeklong OMEC. The team was greeted by the hospital’s staff of eight, all eager and ready to help transform the 675 square-foot space into a state-of-the-art operating facility. After the long day’s journey and afternoon of hard work, the Lions Club Salamá officially welcomed the Moran team; Senator Rand Paul, MD, and his staff; the Hope Alliance; and the various media outlets who joined the trip (including the Washington Post, NBC, and the Christian Broadcast Network) with a surprise ceremony that included a wonderful traditional Guatemalan dinner and Mayan dancers.

AUGUST 18, 2014

As the medical teams arrived for their first day of the OMEC, they found a long line of patients wrapped around the small building, all eagerly awaiting their opportunity for restored sight. The tiny dirt street in front of the hospital was lined by oxen-pulled carts, the mode of transportation for many of the patients. The team instantly got to work. Most of the surgeries involved removal of cataracts—some extremely complex. Each team member had a unique and important role to play, ranging from registering patients to creating medical charts and administering eye drops. Others guided patients to the operating tables, and doctors performed the surgeries. Before lunchtime rolled around, the Moran team fell into a rhythm that quickly moved patients through the waiting line and into surgery. By dinnertime, 41 patients had received the gift of sight.

AUGUST 19, 2014

It was a magical morning as the patients from the day before arrived bright and early to have their eye patches removed. Patients and their families anxiously waited for the physicians to remove the bandages. One by one, patients rejoiced as their patches were removed and they opened their eyes to the sight of their families for the first time in decades. Patients and their families shed tears of happiness and danced with joy at their second chance for sight. Bernardo Reyes, a patient of Dr. Susan MacDonald, laughed as she removed the eye patches from his cataract surgery the day before. He was so overwhelmed at his renewed sight that he exclaimed to Dr. MacDonald, “I’ll never forget you until the day I die. When you get to heaven, make sure you look for me. I’ll put in a good word for you so that we can someday meet again.”

Mr. Reyes, an 84-year-old farmer with advanced cataracts, heard about the upcoming Moran OMEC on a radio commercial. He walked hours to the nearest bus station, then took a long, tumultuous bus ride to get from his 20-person village to the Lions Club Eye Hospital Salamá for the opportunity to see again. Mr. Reyes is a farmer, still growing his own corn, beans, and peanuts, in order to survive on approximately $1 USD per day.
AUGUST 20-22, 2014
The team continued to work tirelessly throughout the remainder of the week. Each morning, bandages were removed from the previous day’s patients, setting an upbeat tone for each new day. One morning, after Dr. Alan Crandall removed the bandage from one of his patients, she quietly whispered to him, “I have been quietly dying for eight years and you have given me my life back.” Dr. Crandall responded, “This, at the end of the day, is why we do what we do.”

In between his surgeries alongside Drs. Chang, Crandall, Furlong, and MacDonald, Senator Rand Paul expressed his deep appreciation for the Moran Eye Center’s ability to serve the people of Guatemala. “I don’t know how we would have done this without the Moran Eye Center. Dr. Crandall has been great and everybody has been so helpful. There really is a technique and talent to getting everything organized and all the equipment here. We’re really proud of the Moran Eye Center and we’re glad to be working with them.”

AUGUST 23, 2014
After an exhausting, yet exhilarating week, the team completed the final post-operative exams and set to work packing up the operating room. By the end of the day, after loading 33 pieces of luggage and equipment into a bus, they headed back to Guatemala City for their departing flights the next morning.

In total, the team performed 230 sight-restoring surgeries. This includes cataracts, pterygiums, and even laser procedures for diabetic retinopathy.

FUTURE PLANS
The Outreach Team at the Moran Eye Center plans to return to the Lions Club Eye Hospital Salamá in December 2014 to once again work with Guatemalan ophthalmologists Drs. Lisbeth Alcantara and Orlando Gonzalez. In 2015, Dr. Alcantara will travel to Salt Lake City to complete her three-month International Observership at the Moran Eye Center. Over the next five years, the Moran team will continue to travel to Guatemala to conduct OMECs, all the while training the local physicians, nurses, and hospital staff how to perform simple ophthalmic surgeries and procedures, and how to treat and prevent ophthalmic diseases.