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Group Brings Health Care Across Borders

By Patrick Fitzgerald

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One speaks mostly English, the other strictly Spanish, yet the eye exam is a success.

Michael León, a 13-year-old from Anonos, a shantytown in western San José, takes his new glasses from the volunteer doctor and puts them on, beaming at the suddenly clear world around him.

"One of his eyes was good, but the other was really bad," explains Adam Lorenzetti, a medical student from the U.S. state of West Virginia volunteering at Children Without Borders (CWB), a small nonprofit providing health care in Anonos after setting up shop last April in the Triángulo Solidario shantytown in Tibás, north of San José.

While Costa Rica's health care system is robust enough to attract international visitors interested in medical tourism, enough people in San José's poorer areas fall through the cracks to keep CWB busy providing basic medical care, often for the first time, to residents of the *precarios*, or shantytowns.

"It's not being done like you would get from an optometrist in the United States, but it's close," says Dr. George Whitelaw, CWB's co-founder and president. "The people seem



to be pretty happy. They seem to be coming in droves for it."

Indeed, CWB's small clinic, a converted house near Anonos, is bustling this April morning. Toddlers play with toys while older children sit quietly in the waiting room, which is doubling as an eye examination room today. In the back, the group's resident physician, Dr. Alejandro Abellán, sees patients, often entire families at once.

Lorenzetti is one of five volunteers from West Virginia, the first group of multiple volunteers to come down from the United States.

"They've energized this place considerably," Whitelaw says.

Whitelaw calls the clinic in Anonos "a perfect setup." The group continues to offer care at its clinic in Tibás, but a lack of run-



ning water there and its distance from the local precario caused the group to look elsewhere for its headquarters.

"You have to be close enough so it's easy for them to come to you," explains CWB Executive Director María Rosa Velasco. "You have to be close enough, but not inside."

The headquarters also needed to meet government specifications in order for the clinic to have legal access to prescriptions, according to Velasco. She says navigating the government bureaucracy has been the most challenging aspect of getting the group up and running.

"You need permission for everything," she says. "You need a paper for everything."

Fundraising has also been a problem, with current economic conditions in the United States, Whitelaw says. Seeing little success, the group stopped fundraising between November and March, which Whitelaw now admits was "a tactical error." A series of fundraisers is in the works, but the group had to halve its budget to \$60,000, losing some personnel in the process.

Other than Abellán, Velasco and the group's receptionist, CWB's entire staff, including its board in Boston, Massachusetts, works on a volunteer basis.

"We're holding on tight, trying to keep our head above water," Whitelaw says.

Whitelaw, an orthopedic surgeon, attended medical school at Boston University and has primarily practiced in the Boston area. Since the late 1970s, he has regularly made volunteer medical trips to countries such as Nepal, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam and

A Clear New World: Left, U.S. medical student and Children Without Borders volunteer Adam Lorenzetti tests the improved eyesight of 13-year-old Michael León at the group's clinic in Anonos. The youth received two pairs of glasses from among several boxes' worth donated by the Lions Club in West Virginia, far left. Below, resident physician Alejandro Abellán attends a family.

Photos by Ronald Reyes | Tico Times

"It was upsetting," Velasco says, but they have bounced back.

Abellán, a Costa Rican, visits the clinic in the mornings before heading to his two primary practices. He says the most common ailments he sees among the children – adults commonly seek his care as well – are skin diseases, asthma and intestinal parasites, often caused by malnourishment.

Thanks to a donation from the Lions Club in West Virginia, the volunteers also have several boxes of used glasses, sorted by prescription, to hand out to children.

"Some people, we're just helping them a little. But a couple of people, you put those glasses on them and they're just like, 'Whoa!'" says family doctor Rosemarie Lorenzetti, another West Virginia volunteer, with a smile. "That's pretty cool."

For more information about Children Without Borders or to make a donation, visit cwbfoundation.org. ■

Ukraine. A similar trip to Costa Rica helped inspire him to found CWB, which he says makes "a sustainable difference."

"We decided what we wanted was not to have children get real sick and then take care of them. Let's do something on a preventive basis – prevent these problems from occurring – and in that way really make a difference," Whitelaw says.

Whitelaw envisions eventually spreading CWB to other locations in Costa Rica, then other Central American countries and beyond. But, right now, he is focused on getting the San José clinic up and running. The group suffered a minor setback earlier this year after thieves stole antibiotics, office supplies and toys for the children's waiting room.



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