

Orinda Eye Doctor Goes South

By Chris Lavin



A nurse holds a cataract

Photo provided

Kids grow up quickly, and one of the steps of Andy Sorenson's growing up happened when he was 13. His father had removed a cataract from the eye of a patient, dropped it, clink, into a small dish, and handed it to him. The boy carefully picked up the dish, and took it down the road. It was Guatemala, and he was to show the patient's family what had been making their father become blind.

"It was pretty amazing," Sorenson said. He still thinks about that day – all the time.

Yet that experience happened more than three decades ago, and while Sorenson now lives in Orinda, he still goes back to Central America. He became an ophthalmologist like his father, and his brother, and they all operate the Sorenson Eye Clinic in Berkeley when they're not removing cataracts at the Hospital

de la Familia in northern Guatemala, mainly for descendants of the Mayan tribe.

Sorenson is modest when he speaks of his work. "You can't do anything without the nurses," he says, when asked about his accomplishments. He speaks of his patients fondly, and his photo collection includes lots of shots of lots of smiling people with big white pads taped over one eye, often giving the thumb's up sign.

If left untreated, cataracts continue to develop in the lens of an eye, finally resulting in blindness. Lack of health care, and specialists who are able to do eye surgery, lead thousands of people to become blind in Guatemala, and they have no recourse but to accept their condition. Sorenson is part of an 18-member team who goes to Guatemala to do the surgeries, where he can remove 30 to 40 cataracts a day.

Sorenson isn't the only one to give back. His wife, Erika, is on the board of the Orinda Union School District, and they have three children, ages 10, 12 and 14.