

Unite for Sight: Empowering Communities Worldwide through Innovative, Sustainable Programmes

In the last issue of Eye News (Vol. 11, No. 6) the Correspondent News featured an article about Unite for Sight's successful programme in Humjibre, Ghana, to distribute eye glasses, provide free Cataract Surgery and educate the population about eye health. This was only one of Unite for Sight's endeavours throughout the world, and the following article provides further information about the organisation and their international efforts to improve eye health.



Unite For Sight's volunteer Julie Harris provides a vision screening.

'Unite for Sight' is a 501©3 non-profit organisation that empowers communities worldwide to improve eye health and eliminate preventable blindness. More than 4,000 volunteers work in ninety chapters established at universities, medical schools, corporations, high schools, and in communities throughout the world. Additionally, Volunteer Teams are sent to 25 countries to provide eye care and eye health education programmes to medically underserved communities.

Worldwide, 90 chapters of Unite for Sight provide vision screening and vision education programmes in community centres. In addition to screening and education, programmes also provide complete eye care treatment for all diagnosed people.

Unite for Sight's Volunteer Teams are comprised of doctors, nurses, students, and public health professionals who implement programmes in 25 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. Each team is co-ordinated in partnership with grassroots non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and medical institutions, which ensures that the community's needs are identified by local people. The volunteers prescribe eyeglasses, screen for eye disease, and coordinate and fund the diagnosis and treatment of eye diseases, including surgery, by doctors. Volunteers also implement 'Train the Trainer' programmes for teachers and educate children and adults about eye health and ways to prevent blindness.

Case Study: An Original Eye Care Programme in Refugee Camps

Unite for Sight recently received a grant from the US Agency for International Development (USAID)* to fund its eye care programme at Buduburam Refugee Camp, Ghana. The Buduburam Refugee Camp in

Gomoa, Ghana was established in early 1990 by the government of Ghana to host a population of Liberian refugees fleeing the Liberian Civil War, which began on December 24, 1989. Located one hour from Accra, the refugee camp is a 120 acre area. Today, Buduburam has a total population of 77,398, which includes 42,398 resident refugees from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast, as well as a Ghanaian villager population of 35,000. Buduburam has a total of 19,000 children, including 15,000 students and 4,000 out-of-school children. While there are 48 primary and junior secondary schools with 13,700 students, the camp includes three high schools with 1,300 students.

Like all Unite for Sight programmes, this programme at Buduburam originated due to an urgent community need. Karrus, a teacher at the refugee camp, learned about Unite for Sight while searching for healthcare resources on the internet. He contacted the organisation and immediately began steps towards establishing a new chapter at the camp. Soon thereafter, a second refugee camp resident, Jeremiah, Director of the NGO Self Help Initiative for Sustainable Development (SHIFSD), sought Unite for Sight's assistance in what he observed to be an escalating need for eye care intervention. At present, there is only one health clinic with a single qualified physician for the 77,938 camp residents, and eye care was never previously provided at Buduburam. Unite for Sight worked with Jeremiah, SHIFSD and Karrus to create a plan to restore and



Patients at Buduburam awaiting eye care.



Children with new sunglasses at Buduburam.



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is the Founder, President & CEO of Unite for Sight. She founded the organisation in 2000, motivated by her work as a Clinical Ophthalmology Research Associate and her interaction with low-income patients. She has a Bachelors Degree in Biology and Anthropology from Yale University and is currently teaching high school science in Connecticut. She is due to begin medical school at Stanford University in the Autumn of 2005.

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A child at Buduburam receives a vision screening.



Anthony, a Buduburam resident who has had his sight restored through Cataract Surgery, spends time with his wife Betty.

Early reports indicate that Unite For Sight's Volunteer Team has provided sight-restoring surgery to 50 blind patients

improve vision for thousands of people.

Within two months, Unite for Sight assembled a volunteer team to screen children and adults for treatable eye conditions, including refractive error, cataracts, xerophthalmia, trachoma, pterygium, and conjunctivitis. A partnership was also established with the Christian Eye Clinic in Tema, Ghana, to provide treatment and surgery to the patients. To guarantee treatment, Unite for Sight facilitated and funded transportation to the clinic, nearly two hours away. The Buduburam programme also includes a 'Train the Trainer' programme for teachers in the refugee camp's schools. Teachers learn basic visual acuity testing and participate in seminars about eye health so that they can recognise potential eye disease or vision problems among their students as well as be introduced to Unite for Sight's classroom curriculum. Just the start of a lasting collaboration, Karrus now heads the local chapter, and the SHIFSD director is a crucial local partner, coordinating the volunteers on-site, and spreading the word within the camp.

Early reports indicate that Unite For Sight's Volunteer Team has already provided sight-restoring surgery to 50 previously blind patients. It is anticipated that by the end of August, more than 4,000 patients will have been screened, received eyeglasses and sunglasses, and have been referred to an eye clinic for treatment and surgery. Lutee, a woman at Buduburam Refugee Camp, recently received sight-restoring Cataract Surgery through Unite for Sight's programme. When her eye patch was removed the day after surgery, she exclaimed, "I see the trees and the gate to the eye centre... I see the white gate, and I can tell you that

it is open. Praise the Lord! His angels have heard my prayers and sent you to help me!"

The Buduburam Refugee Camp programme is serving as a model for the organisation's programmes throughout the world; within two months, new programmes will begin at refugee camps in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone.

Microenterprise for Sustainability

To facilitate sustainable eye care programmes at Buduburam, Unite for Sight developed a new Microenterprise Programme, which began in February 2005. A group of women at the refugee camp are creating eyeglass cases,

which Unite for Sight will purchase from the women and subsequently sell in North America and Europe. All of the sale price will fund the Buduburam community's eye care expenses. This programme, therefore, serves a twofold purpose. Firstly, Unite for Sight will purchase the goods from the women, thus providing them with an income. Secondly, the proceeds will fund the community's eye care expenses.

Additionally, plans are underway to implement a microenterprise programme in other communities throughout the world beginning in May 2005. Unite for Sight's chapters in developing countries will produce eyeglass cases, which will subsequently be sold in North America and Europe in order to fund eye care expenses in each community.

Unite for Sight's Innovation

In addition to Unite for Sight's measurable impact, there is an equally compelling achievement. The organisation has found a way to unite doctors, nurses, students, and other people, especially younger people, across borders, across economic status, and across professional lines. Unite for Sight mobilises groups and shows that anyone can become part of a global solution to restore sight and prevent blindness.

*About USAID: The U.S. Agency for International Development has provided economic and humanitarian assistance worldwide for more than 40 years.



An ophthalmologist performing Cataract Surgery.

For further information about Unite for Sight's activities and how to become involved visit www.uniteforsight.org