

John Klein: NSU optometry students bring care to Central America

By John Klein Tulsa World | Posted: Monday, February 13, 2017 12:00 am



Dr. Alissa Proctor holds pairs of old glasses that will be measured and have lenses replaced if needed that will be donated to kids in Honduras in the Optometry Building on the NSU campus in Tahlequah on Feb. 3. STEPHEN PINGRY/Tulsa World

TAHLEQUAH — Dr. Alissa Proctor knows Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry students are touched by an annual trip to Central America.

“I remember a couple of years ago someone brought us a hand-scribbled note at the open-air clinic we had set up in Honduras,” said Proctor, associate professor. “It had a simple message. I need help. I can’t get there.

“Please help me. I would be very grateful.”

So, a couple of NSU optometry students loaded up some equipment, located a car and went to give the man an eye exam.

“The best thing about this, and one of the reasons we have been doing this here at NSU for so long, is because it touches the lives of our students in far more ways than academics,” said Proctor. “Yes, it is a fantastic learning experience. We love the real world experience.

“But, one of the great things is that through the years we’ve had students come home from this trip with amazing stories.”

No one knows exactly how many years optometry students from NSU have been going on this spring mission trip but it is considered one of the highlights at the Oklahoma College of Optometry.

Around 17 students, along with three doctors, will make the trip this spring to set up open-air eye exam clinics in Roatan, Honduras.

In four days, students and doctors will see about 1,000 patients.

Through donations of old eyeglasses from Oklahomans, and the contribution of several eyeglass companies, the NSU students will take about 1,200 eyeglasses with them for distribution to patients.

Students at NSU’s highly acclaimed Oklahoma College of Optometry have spent months helping to collect, clean and in some cases repair donated eyeglasses.

They load up eye exam equipment, eye drops and all of the items needed for an eye clinic.

“The leading cause of preventable blindness in third world countries is lack of glasses,” said Proctor. “The people down there have such a need.”

In the last 15 years, NSU students and faculty have done mission trips to the Amazon River, Brazil; Sarstun, Guatemala; and Roatan, Honduras.

The last eight years the mission trips have gone to Honduras.

The trips are financed in a number of ways including a \$100,000 endowment to fund the Henry and Jo Ann McCabe Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry Vision Care International Mission Scholarship.

“All of the students get involved in some way to help make this trip possible,” said Proctor. “We encourage them to go back to their communities and try to find charitable contributions, either glasses or financial.

“We have garage sales and bake sales and alumni activities to fund this mission.”

There are about 112 students in NSU's Oklahoma College of Optometry, a four-year professional program. Proctor estimates about 50 percent of the students in the optometry program participate in some way to make the mission happen each year.

"They either help us collect or clean or fix the eyeglasses," said Proctor. "They help us pack up the equipment we'll need.

"Many of them have been on the trip and they can help prepare others for the trip."

Students from first-year through fourth-year participate.

"It is the perfect way to take the knowledge our students have gained in the classrooms and clinics and apply it in a way that benefits people that really need our help," said Proctor. "It is an excellent teaching tool.

"We have people that come to our clinics in Honduras with things we never see in our clinics here in the United States. So, it is a useful tool for teaching, too. We tell them before we go on the trip that we want to know what they can do without all of the fancy equipment that we have here."

Proctor has been involved with the program for about 10 years. The mission trip never disappoints.

"I think a lot of students go on this trip with the idea that they are going to be changing lives," said Proctor. "And, in many ways, they are changing lives. They are giving people their eyesight back for the first time or the first time in along time.

"However, what we've found out is that the students often come home a changed person, too. It is life-changing moment for everyone — the people we are able to help and for the students who will never forget it."



Student Britton Adams sits with boxes of old glasses that will be measured and repaired to be donated to kids in Honduras in the Optometry Building on the NSU campus in Tahlequah, on Feb. 3. STEPHEN PINGRY/Tulsa World



Optometry students from NSU examine patients in Guatemala during a recent trip. This spring, around 17 students, along with three doctors, will make the trip again to set up open-air eye exam clinics in Roatan, Honduras. Courtesy



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