

Seeing The Future In Laos:

A Special Report from Humanitarian Photojournalist Geoff Oliver Bugbee

Vientiane, Laos, January 2009 — Patdjoa, age 9, is reading braille on a wooden classroom bench, immune to the cacophonous shuffle of other blind pupils moving about her periphery. The shutter release on my camera temporarily disrupts her focus. For a moment, she shifts her gaze upwards, revealing a set of stark, cloudy-white eyes.

Patdjoa is at the Home of Light, a learning and boarding facility in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, for young children with vision loss. It was set up in 1995 as the first of three existing blind schools in Laos, under the care of the Vientiane Ophthalmology Centre and a place where children like her have a fighting chance at becoming literate despite their disabilities.

By the time Patdjoa was discovered by the Centre during an outreach visit, her blindness was incurable. She had completely lost sight in both eyes from congenital glaucoma. In some cases, early detection and appropriate treatment can slow or even stop vision loss. For Patdjoa however, the only consolation was to be in a community where she could live and be educated with other children like her.

When Patdjoa arrived at the Home of Light three years ago, she spoke only Hmong, a rare tonal language used by people in remote regions of Laos. Now she can also speak Lao and is on her way to reading braille fluently and leading an independent life.

Eye Care In Need

Patdjoa's case highlights the need for a comprehensive eye care program in this landlocked, least-developed country in Southeast Asia.

The World Health Organization estimates that blindness affects more than 37 million people around the world, 90 percent of whom live in developing countries. With approximately 30,000 blind, the leading causes of eye diseases in Laos include cataract, corneal scarring, glaucoma and retinal diseases.

Currently, Laos has only twenty-five eye doctors for its six million people. To date, there are no in-country subspecialty training programs for ophthalmologists or formal study programs for ophthalmic nurses or biomedical engineers.

Over the last two weeks of January 2009, the ORBIS Flying Eye Hospital, the world's only airborne surgical and training facility housed within a DC-10 aircraft, helped fill this gap. It visited Laos for the first time on a presidential invite, finding a home for itself on the tarmac of Wattay International Airport.

While incoming Thai Airways planes from Bangkok unloaded passengers and Vietnam Airlines jets taxied for take off to Phnom Penh, 45 ophthalmologists and medical professionals from Laos and its neighbor — Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam — diligently worked side-by-side with an international medical team onboard the Flying Eye Hospital.

Training to improve local surgical techniques, nursing skills and all levels of eye care came from a whip-smart team of volunteer specialists in cataract, glaucoma, retina and oculo-plastics — a specialized area that focuses on eyelid abnormalities and reconstructive surgery.

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Photo courtesy of Geoff Oliver Bugbee

Patdjoa, age 9, learned to read Braille at a special school in Vientiane. Like many of her blind classmates, early detection and treatment could have slowed or stopped her vision loss. With the help of ORBIS, physicians throughout Southeast Asia are being educated in pediatric eye care so that fewer children will suffer needlessly.

Saving Sight

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Like Mother, Like Son

It was screening day at Vientiane's Ophthalmology Centre, when ORBIS volunteer faculty and staff identify patients for surgery.

Like many small boys the world over, eight-year-old Peul Bouttavong found it hard to sit in one place for very long. He amused himself by darting around the patient waiting area, tossing a foam rubber airplane into the air and then sprinting hard to make the catch.

His mother, Phonesavanch Hatsady, age 35, sat quietly, watching him. When she was born with congenital ptosis (commonly known as droopy-eyelid), the condition could not be treated surgically in her province of Luang Namtha, Laos, which borders southern China.

Eight years ago, when Phonesavanch gave birth to Peul, her persistent worries of passing on this condition to him seemed to disappear. Then, about two weeks into his life, she noticed that his right eye was not opening all the way. Her lingering fear had come true.

Like her, he was born with congenital ptosis – when the upper eyelid fails to rise above the pupil line, brought on by an isolated dystrophy of the muscle that normally elevates the eyelid. The condition

can lead to amblyopia – most commonly known as lazy eye – in which the eye may look normal, but is functionally blind.

Phonesavanch, a highly educated woman and trained emergency medical doctor, was frustrated at not being able to help her child. When a colleague from the general hospital's eye clinic told her about ORBIS, she packed up her son and made the 24-hour bus journey from their province to Vientiane.

Their surgeries were split: mother on the first day, her child on the second day. Onboard the Flying Eye Hospital, Peul's surgery was broadcast to the seating area and teaching facility in the front of the plane. During the procedure, two hands-on Lao trainees assisted ORBIS volunteer physician, Dr. Kimberley Hakin, an ophthalmologist specialist from the United Kingdom.

"Both of these cases proved to be very successful for both the patient outcome and the teaching of the local physicians," said Dr. Srinii Iyengar, an ORBIS staff ophthalmologist. "In terms of recovery, both the mother and son are doing extremely well."

While Patdjoa might not be as fortunate as Phonesavanch and her son Peul, with the help of ORBIS, ophthalmologists in Laos now have a better chance for tackling curable forms of blindness in the years to come. ■



Photo courtesy of Geoff O'Brien, Bugbee

ORBIS is a nonprofit global development organization whose mission is to preserve and restore sight by strengthening the capacity of local partners in their efforts to prevent and treat blindness.

Since 1982, ORBIS has dramatically and positively affected millions of lives in the developing world by building local capacity to deal with eye health, educating those not fully aware of the preventive steps they can take and honing the skills of local medical professionals in countries where the most modern and effective sight-saving techniques are not widely utilized.

ORBIS delivers eye care and blindness prevention resources through:

- The **Flying Eye Hospital**, the world's only airborne ophthalmic training facility.
- **Hospital-based programs and fellowships** that transfer new techniques and provide continuing education to local eye care personnel.
- Long-term **country programs** – in Bangladesh, China, Ethiopia, India, Vietnam and elsewhere – that build eye care and blindness prevention infrastructure on a larger scale.
- The **Cyber-Sight®** telemedicine project that provides partner ophthalmologists throughout the world with one-on-one mentoring and case-by-case consultation opportunities via the Internet.

ORBIS programs have enhanced the skills of more than 195,000 health care professionals in 86 countries and have provided eye care treatment to more than 6.8 million people. Because of ORBIS' train the trainer approach, millions more have benefited from the new skills that have been passed on in those countries.

ORBIS envisions a world in which no one is needlessly blind, where quality eye care, education and treatment are available to every human being.

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A Singer's Love Of Her Country Is Music To The Eyes

She is one of her country's most prolific storytellers, translating the lives of the rural and urban poor into captivating songs of the human spirit. And today, two decades into a career that has produced an astonishing 700 albums and made her an international musical icon, Momtaz Begum has begun nurturing the eye as well as the ear, by funding a namesake hospital that, with ORBIS support, is helping to tackle the world's leading cause of blindness – cataract.

The 50-bed Momtaz Eye Hospital, in the Manikganj district of central Bangladesh, was founded by the singer in memory of her father, Modhu Boyati, himself a much-loved recording artist. As a little girl, Momtaz remembers her father's beautiful voice singing to her and his blind eyes that couldn't see. He suffered from cataracts, and his family suffered, too, unable to raise enough money for his cure. Though raised in poverty, Momtaz inherited a priceless gift from her father, her voice, which has brought her fame and fortune.

"When I was young I couldn't go to school to pursue higher studies, but I thought 'I can sing, I can help people through my singing.'"

She founded Momtaz Eye Hospital to give back to the people of Manikganj who otherwise would not be able to afford health care.

Financing The People

Lack of financial means keeps millions of cataract sufferers around the world from seeking treatment. Lack of awareness that cataracts can be surgically removed, through a relatively simple procedure, prevents still more from even questioning the permanence of their blindness. An innovative ORBIS project in Manikganj district is providing solutions to both obstacles.

Momtaz Eye Hospital is one of three area hospitals participating in "demand-side financing" projects that aim to eliminate

100 percent of cataract blindness among its population of more than 1.2 million. If successful, the project will make Manikganj the first district in the country to achieve that level of progress against cataract, a condition that has long stymied eye care professionals because of economic and cultural barriers to corrective surgery.

Through the project, more than 400 primary health care workers in the district received training in 2008 to diagnose cataracts with the use of a simple flashlight and vision chart. Each then took their newfound knowledge on house-to-house rounds, where they identified candidates for surgery and provided them with vouchers to cover the cost at one of the participating hospitals.



Bangladeshi bookbinder Abdur Razzaq (left) receives a voucher for cataract surgery from a primary health care worker who received training in basic eye care. Abdur will likely redeem his voucher at Momtaz Eye Hospital, which is near his book-binding stall and has an excellent reputation for good cataract service.

As newly-healed patients returned to their families and neighborhoods, other cataract sufferers learned that they, too, could have their vision restored – at no cost or on a sliding scale based on income – creating a surging demand for the procedure and generating significant income for the hospitals.

"Most ORBIS projects build capacity of partner institutions by focusing on the supply side, such as improving eye care service," says Dr. Abu Raihan, ORBIS country director, Bangladesh. "Demand side is about financing people."



ORBIS Sight Ambassador Momtaz Begum

At Momtaz Eye Hospital alone, the demand-side financing project has led to a 70 percent increase in cataract surgeries. "Before ORBIS, we performed an average of 20-30 cataract procedures per month," says Dr. ASM Moyeen Hasan, Director General of Momtaz Hospitals. "Now we perform more than 200 per month. The difference is extraordinary."

The increased surgical volume at Momtaz has reinvigorated the entire hospital and its staff. "Because the flow of patients has increased, we're treating many more people than ever before – involving all kinds of surgery, not just cataract," says Dr. Moyeen. "That, in turn, has greatly improved our financial situation."

For Momtaz Begum, the ORBIS project is helping her fulfill a personal and professional dream to use her music and its earnings to address serious health problems facing her country.

"ORBIS has created an enabling environment for our eye hospital to accomplish all of these things and has helped us change our thinking from a charity to sustainability," shares Momtaz. "Because of this new approach, my district will be the first in all of Bangladesh where elderly blind people are not made to wait indefinitely for cataract surgery." ■

UPDATE: Momtaz Begum was recently appointed to parliament, the highest law-making institution in Bangladesh, selected by the government in recognition of her musical contributions and community development work. Momtaz now will be even more influential in persuading policymakers to invest in eye care.

Photo courtesy of Raül Vazquez

Corporate Sponsors

Alcon Renews Global Sponsorship

Alcon Laboratories, the world's leading producer of eye care products and equipment, has renewed its status as an ORBIS Global Sponsor through May 2011.

Alcon's sponsorship includes a generous cash contribution of \$1.2 million, donations of equipment and medical supplies and employee service through the Alcon Volunteer Biomedical Corps.

Through the Volunteer Biomedical Corps, Alcon technicians participate in training programs onboard the Flying Eye Hospital and in ORBIS-sponsored hospital-based programs in developing countries. Alcon biomedical engineers complement the hundreds of volunteer doctors and nurses who make ORBIS' medical training programs possible.

Since 1979, Alcon has been a major supporter of ORBIS, providing ophthalmic equipment, medical supplies and financial support. A recent contribution by Alcon employee volunteers illustrates how Alcon's participation goes beyond financial support



Alcon Service Engineers Mario Vistro and Chrysler Manlapid train ORBIS staff on the use and maintenance of Alcon equipment, including the INFINITT® Vision System, onboard the Flying Eye Hospital in the Philippines.

and product donations to help ORBIS fulfill its mission.

During a regularly-scheduled maintenance check in Subic Bay, Philippines, Alcon arranged for three technicians to conduct an in-service training on the Flying Eye Hospital. The technicians provided ORBIS doctors, nurses and biomedical

technicians advanced training on the proper usage and maintenance of the medical equipment onboard. As part of this in-service visit, Alcon donated an OcuScan® RxP Ophthalmic Ultrasound System, ensuring that the Flying Eye Hospital's operating room remains at the cutting edge of medical technology. ■

FedEx Fellowships Awarded In Vietnam, Dominican Republic And Peru

For more than twenty years, FedEx has played an indispensable role in helping ORBIS achieve its vision of a world in which no one is needlessly blind. At the heart of the relationship is the

generous and long-standing involvement of FedEx with the Flying Eye Hospital. The company provides the maintenance and technical expertise essential to keeping the Flying Eye Hospital in peak operating condition.

As part of its global sponsorship, FedEx launched the global FedEx Fellows program, which designates two ophthalmologists per year to complete one- to three-month fellowships at some of the world's leading eye institutes. Dr. Nguyen Chi Trung The Truyen, an ophthalmologist from Ho Chi Minh City Eye Hospital, was chosen as a FedEx Fellow following the April 2008 Flying Eye Hospital program in Vietnam. On

April 1, 2009, he began a three-month in-depth training program under the tutelage of Dr. Gene Howard, professor of ophthalmology, at Albert Florens Storm Eye Institute at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston.

FedEx also sponsored two recent Flying Eye Hospital programs benefiting the Latin America and Caribbean regions: Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic (February 9-20) and Trujillo, Peru (February 23 - March 6). In addition to delivering four weeks of intensive eye health training, two talented ophthalmologists - Dr. Modesta Almánzar Santos from the AYBAR/CECANOT Hospital in Santo Domingo and Dr. Luis Fernando Geldres Del Risco of the Instituto de Regionale Oftalmologia in Trujillo - were selected as FedEx Fellows. ■



(Left to right) Dr. Ricardo Cáceda Pérez, director of the Instituto de Regionale Oftalmologia in Peru is joined by the newest FedEx Fellow, Dr. Luis Fernando Geldres Del Risco, ORBIS Medical Director Dr. Hunter Chenwick and ORBIS Senior Technical Advisor, Joan McLeod-Omauale.

United Airlines, Official Founding Airline Sponsor

The Flying Eye Hospital began its 2009 program schedule with its first-ever visit to Laos. Flying the plane during segments of the program were four volunteer pilots from ORBIS' official Founding Airline Sponsor, United Airlines. Carl Hakenen and Bill Willson flew the Flying Eye Hospital from Subic Bay, Philippines to Vientiane, Laos, and their colleagues Dick Stoddard and Ken Burnham were at the controls when the plane took off from Laos on its way to its next program stop in the Dominican Republic. The program enabled all 25 of Laos' eye care providers to participate in training sessions onboard the aircraft and at the Vientiane Ophthalmology Centre, the national coordinating body for eye care services. More than 75 patients received free sight-saving surgery during the program, the impact of which will be ongoing as Laotian doctors utilize their new skills to care for their own patients in the years ahead. ■



ORBIS volunteer pilots outside the Flying Eye Hospital after landing in Laos: retired United Captains Bill Willson (left) and Carl Hakenen (right) along with FedEx Flight Engineer Dave Hulbert.

Ronald McDonald House Charities Continues Its Commitment To Pediatric Ophthalmology

Ronald McDonald House Charities® (RMHC) is continuing its support of programs that directly improve the lives of children through a three-year grant to ORBIS focused on reducing pediatric blindness in India.

This project increases the pediatric eye care capacity at the Choithram Eye Hospital

in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, allowing the hospital to provide treatment to thousands of poor children throughout central India. By training local doctors, developing a community outreach program and conducting public awareness activities, this project will help to ensure that current and future generations of children across the region have improved access to quality eye care.

RMHC has been a long-standing supporter of ORBIS' work with children in India, as well as Bulgaria, Costa Rica and Peru. We are grateful that RMHC has once again partnered with us to help prevent avoidable blindness among the children of India. ■

OptiMedica Donates PASCAL Photocoagulator For Use Aboard The Flying Eye Hospital

Global ophthalmic company OptiMedica Corp. generously donated a PASCAL® photocoagulator, adding cutting-edge technology to the Flying Eye Hospital that will enable ORBIS to better train doctors in the treatment of retinal disorders like diabetic retinopathy, the leading cause of blindness in the United States and an emerging

threat worldwide.

To introduce PASCAL to ORBIS, OptiMedica's Mr. Sean Teo and Dr. George Marcellino joined the Flying Eye Hospital for its two-week program in Laos. There they provided hands-on PASCAL training to ORBIS staff as well as regional program participants from Southeast Asia. ■



Laotian eye care professionals observe the PASCAL in use during treatment of a patient with diabetic retinopathy.

Support

The work of ORBIS would not be possible without the generous support of its donors. As a nonprofit entity, ORBIS relies on private cash and gift-in-kind donations in order to keep operating. The following individuals, foundations and corporations are recognized for their level of giving during the past year, which has contributed immensely to the provision of eye care for people throughout the developing world.

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April 1, 2008 through
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Advocates for Sight

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ORBIS Advocates for Sight are volunteers who raise funds and awareness for our sight-saving mission. As an ORBIS Advocate for Sight, your involvement can range from a one-time event to an ongoing fundraising campaign to periodic presentations in your community.

RUN FOR SIGHT

Running is a not only a healthy activity for you, it can be a way to help other people see. In 2008 several groups of ORBIS Advocates for Sight took to the road to raise funds for our sight-saving work.

The Great Ethiopia Run

ORBIS Ireland board members and supporters banded together for The Great Ethiopia Run – a 10k road race in Addis Ababa – to raise funds for our trachoma elimination project in the Gamo Gofa, Konso and Derashe regions of southern Ethiopia.

The Great Ethiopia Run takes place in Addis Ababa every November. In 2008, its eighth year, the race attracted more than 32,000 people from all over the world. Twenty ORBIS Ireland board members and supporters as well as ORBIS Ethiopia staff and their families participated in the run.

After the run, several ORBIS Ireland participants visited blindness prevention projects around the nation's capital and then journeyed to the frontlines of rural eye care delivery in Gamo Gofa, Konso and Derashe. There they held meetings with local health officials and visited health centers, sanitation facilities and school eye care activities.

Join us at the next Great Ethiopian Run on November 22, 2009. For more information please visit www.orbisireland.ie.

Good Life Toronto Marathon

ORBIS was chosen as one of the official charities of the 2008 Good Life Toronto Marathon. Several teams partici-

pated in the marathon to benefit ORBIS and raised more than \$10,000.

A group of nine ORBIS staff members from across the world came together and ran the half marathon as the ORBIS Run for Sight team.

Team Kensington Eye Institute, a group of Canadian Advocates for Sight, participated in the 5K walk for the second year in a row.

We are grateful to all the 2008 participants who raised much-needed funds for ORBIS' sight-saving work. The 2009 Good Life Toronto Marathon is scheduled for Sunday, October 18. For more information, please visit www.orbiscanada.ca. ■

SING FOR SIGHT



Diane Pacenka (left) and Julie Weyne (right)

On Saturday, May 16, 2009, ORBIS supporters Julie Weyne and Diane Pacenka will perform at the third annual Sing for Sight benefit at New York's Canal Room. It will be a fun-filled evening with friends and songs from the 1970's to today. Proceeds benefit ORBIS. See our website www.ORBIS.org for further details. ■

MAKE A PLANNED GIFT

The Visionary Club is a special group of donors who make a lasting impact on blindness prevention by leaving a gift to ORBIS in their will or other estate plans. For further information or to notify ORBIS that you have included us in your will, please contact Tricia Hart at 1-646-674-5526 or Tricia.Hart@orbis.org. ■

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Breaking News

Next Generation Flying Eye Hospital Project Gathers Speed

Since its first mission to Panama in 1982, ORBIS International’s Flying Eye Hospital has delivered hope and help to more than 75 countries. The current plane, a DC-10-10 is approaching 40-years-old and rapidly nearing the end of its projected lifespan. With this in mind, ORBIS has begun the process of replacing it with a newer, more efficient aircraft.

The new Flying Eye Hospital will be a DC-10-30 aircraft, jointly donated to ORBIS in 2008 by FedEx and United Airlines. Formerly serving as an air freight carrier, the plane will soon be refitted to the specifications of an MD-10, then converted in a two-year process into a fully-equipped teaching hospital. Once brought into service, it is expected to meet ORBIS’ needs for a full 20 years.

The MD-10 configuration will introduce a variety of benefits that will lower operating costs of the Flying Eye Hospital while increasing treatment and training capacity. For instance, the MD-10 requires only two pilots instead of three. And because of its larger cargo doors, it will allow the hospital conversion to be accomplished with the use of economical pre-produced modules instead of custom work.

The MD-10 also has a flying range of 6,000 miles versus the



Photo courtesy of Kiran Ridley

current DC-10’s 4,000 miles. The expanded range will enable ORBIS to avoid stops at out-of-the-way stations that charge higher fuel prices. Additionally, greener materials and recycled goods will be used whenever possible in the conversion and hospital building process. As a teaching platform, the ORBIS MD-10 Flying Eye Hospital will model best practices and cutting-edge medical technologies.

An extraordinary alliance between the medical and aviation industry is being forged to make the MD-10 conversion project possible. Its foundation is a \$10 million gift from ORBIS Chairman and Co-Founder A.L. Ueltschi. For more information or ways to help, e-mail MD-10project@orbis.org. ■