



New!

## World Blindness Outreach will go on its 100th mission in February



by **Katie Knol**  
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*World Blindness Outreach volunteers have traveled to 26 countries and performed more than 10,000 eye surgeries since the organization's start in 1990.*

Lebanon-based nonprofit World Blindness Outreach is set to go on its 100th mission in February with a trip to the Dominican Republic.

The group has performed more than 10,000 eye surgeries in 26 countries since its start in 1990, and continues to treat correctable blindness and preventable eye diseases in areas that don't typically have access to high-quality eye care.

Dr. Albert Alley said some areas of the world lack the resources and manpower to do the surgeries. The United States can have one eye doctor per 10,000 people, but some countries have one eye doctor per 1 million people.

Also, he said, a country's limited resources can go toward necessities other than eye care.

Alley said World Blindness Outreach can do hundreds of operations during their week in each country. Common surgeries the group performs include fixing cataracts, doing corneal transplants, treating glaucoma, and fixing crossed eyes.



*A WBO physician works with a Hershey medical student on a surgery in the Dominican Republic.*

“It’s hard to believe that much of the world’s blindness is due to cataracts, and this is a preventative treatment with a 30-minute eye operation, and in many areas of the world, the physicians and the equipment are just not available to accomplish this,” Alley said. “We’ve made that a major duty of ours when we go to these countries to do as many cataracts as possible.”

Fixing crossed eyes, especially in kids, can improve their societal treatment, according to Alley. Children with crossed eyes can be bullied and ridiculed by other kids, experience abuse from adults in their lives, and the condition can be associated with evil in some cultures.

WBO relies on organizations in each country they visit to connect them with patients and ensure there’s continued care after the surgeons leave. These can include another eye doctor, a hospital, or a religious organization. They advertise that WBO is coming to the area and screen patients.

And WBO tries to leave resources and new knowledge in the communities they visit.

“Wherever we go, we like to work with the local doctors and the local nursing personnel,” Alley said. “Many of them are very good, and we like to leave behind some equipment and supplies for them to carry on when we are leaving the area, and we consider that one of our responsibilities. We do as much training as we can. We observe and then train where we feel that is necessary.”



*Dr. Albert Alley visits a patient who had cataract surgery, along with Sister Maria, director of eye care at the hospital where the surgery was performed.*

He said he feels blessed to be able to provide these services to people. Watching someone who hasn't had vision for years be able to see their loved ones is a special experience for the WBO team, but it can bring some sadness to Alley, also.

“On the other hand, I have a kind of sad feeling knowing that there are all these people out there with a disease that can be treated and knowing that their vision can be restored, and yet it's not going to happen unless they're able to obtain care from a group like ours,” he said. “But there's so many people that don't receive care, and they continue this way for the rest of their lives.”

These international trips are also educational opportunities for local students. Though no Lebanon High School students are coming along on the 100th mission next month, they've joined in on previous missions to help with transporting patients and doing small tasks to help the professionals. This trip will have an ophthalmology resident from the Penn State Hershey Medical Center join to practice and learn.



*Lebanon High School students have accompanied past WBO missions, including this 2015 mission to the Dominican Republic.*

World Blindness Outreach was started following an eye program in the Philippines, Alley said.

“It was a life-changing experience,” he said. “As I studied blindness around the world, I realized that 80% of the blindness is either treatable or preventable, and a high percentage of that — 50% of that — is caused by cataracts.”

Alice Doxsee, administrative coordinator, said Alley is too humble to say this himself, but she credits him with the organization's success and impact.

“I'm overwhelmed by the outreach that this nonprofit organization has accomplished. It came from humble beginnings and has sustained itself all this time,” she said. “Dr. Alley would not encourage me to say this, but it's because of his drive and his mission and his passion to help others that I see every day when I'm here in the office.”