

Network restores sight to Nicaraguans

Teenage sisters born with cataracts lived in home for the blind.

Linda Leicht
News-Leader

Teenage sisters Floricelda and Adelina Aguilar can see each other for the first time thanks to cataract surgery sponsored by Springfield-based Rainbow Network

"Their mother said it is an exciting miracle," said Keith Jaspers, co-founder of the agency that works with the poorest residents of rural Nicaragua

Floricelda, 18, and Adelina, 15, are two of six people Rainbow Network is helping to see. All five were living in a home for the blind. They have had vision problems or blindness since they were babies. Surgery could give them all their sight, but because of the lack of medical screening and treatment they were unaware of that possibility

Rainbow Network wants to change that. For the past 11 years, the organization has worked in Nicaragua to help poor people become self-sufficient. The faith-based agency, a registered nongovernmental organization or NGO in Nicaragua, has accomplished that goal through housing initiatives, feeding and water programs, schools and scholarships, small business loans and medical care. Communities work with the NGO through "networks" that allow residents to become participants and leaders in the projects.

Rainbow Network has grown to serve 52,000. The latest is an opportunity to bring vision to a population that has a high percentage of malnutrition-caused blindness.

Springfield ophthalmologist Wendell Scott is excited about the opportunity to establish a screening program in Nicaragua that could offer early detection and treatment

"I think (Rainbow Network) can do it," said Scott. "They have the medical personnel, but they need to know how to do it."

Scott is trying to get a group of trained volunteers to work with Rainbow's medical doctors to train them in vision screening. Such screening could have sent Floricelda and Adelina to an ophthalmologist much earlier

Both girls were born with congenital cataracts that got progressively worse. The family lives in extreme poverty, in a tiny, overcrowded home with a dirt floor and mud walls. They have no clean water to drink or sanitary latrine, and have never seen an ophthalmologist

Living in a school for the blind in Esteli offered the sisters a chance to learn how to function without sight. Rainbow Network gave them a chance to see.

Anabel Hernandez Miranda, 18, also had congenital cataracts and has been given surgery. Teleforo Eduardo Zelaya Ocampo, 24, was scheduled for surgery Wednesday on the glaucoma in his left eye and a prosthesis in his right eye. Rosibel Davila Larios, 46, who has been going blind since she was 12, had surgery to her left eye, returning her vision.

Rainbow Network still needs to raise \$1,200 for surgery later this month so that 11-year-old German Morales will be able to see by dilating an obstruction of both tear ducts



Iris Karina Merlo was the first person to receive her sight through surgery sponsored by Rainbow Network in 2000. Here, she and her parents stand with Rainbow co-founder Keith Jaspers in front of a home they were able to purchase through Rainbow's housing program. Theirs is one of 500 homes completed in May. Each home is 350 square feet, with clay tile floors, concrete block walls and a sheet metal roof. Families, who participate in construction of the homes, are able to purchase the homes at cost -- \$2,500 -- through interest-free loans.



Lisbeth Hernandez Lopez of Nicaragua tries on some frames. With help from Rainbow Network, the teen came to Springfield in 2003 and 2004 for vision surgery.

Caring professionals

These are not the first eye surgeries Rainbow Network has facilitated. More than 25 people have received such assistance from Rainbow, but Springfield residents may remember Lisbeth Hernandez Lopez, a young teenager who came to Springfield for vision surgery in 2003 and 2004.

Now about 19, Lopez was living in the Esteli school when Jaspers discovered the needs there.

Last year, Jaspers was in the northern state of Matagalpa where Esteli is located and decided to drive to the school to visit Lopez. While she was given sight for a brief time after surgery, her body rejected both corneal transplants. Doctors hope that a third transplant, performed after she has completely matured, will not be rejected.

At the school, Jaspers noticed some needs — white canes and Braille notebooks, and Rainbow began assisting the school in those ways. Jaspers hopes to be able to find donors who will help to supplement the \$50,000 the government has provided each year to operate the school.

Learning a lesson from Scott's visit, Jaspers arranged for ophthalmological examinations for the 38 residents at the school. That is when the doctors discovered Floricelda and Adelina and the three others who could benefit from surgery.

"It's guys like Dr. Scott and the other doctors that really lift this program up," said Jaspers. "I don't know what to do. I need those people."

Other southwest Missouri doctors have visited the Rainbow Network program and helped to develop needed programs.

Branson dentist Christian Willard and Forsyth dentist Ed Schanda were among the first medical professionals to work with Rainbow Network. About 10 years ago, the dentists visited Nicaragua to provide needed care, which generally meant pulling teeth rather than restorative care.

They realized that sending volunteer dentists down could not sustain a dental program, so they helped the Rainbow staff in Nicaragua set up a clinic and helped to get donated equipment and supplies. Rainbow now has two full-time dentists on staff.

"From working with Rainbow at that time, early on we realized how much good they were able to provide to the people in Nicaragua," said Willard. "They do more than just putting a Band-Aid on a larger problem."

During several visits to Nicaragua physicians Mark Costley of Monett and Will Moore of Springfield also recognized the need for basic supplies for the medical staff and for breathing treatments for the many people with chronic respiratory problems. They arranged to deliver 14 large tool boxes filled with basic medical supplies for each of the Rainbow Network doctors and 150 nebulizers.

"This has been particularly rewarding to go down there and help those docs," said Costley. "When we told them about the nebulizers they started clapping. ... They were so excited." Costley has been to Nicaragua three times since his first visit. Moore has been there five times, including over Labor Day Weekend when he watched the Rainbow doctors using their kits. "I got to see them in action," he said. "It was very gratifying. Moore's church, Wesley United Methodist, raised more than \$10,000 for medical supplies for the kits. "We need that kind of leadership from professionals," Jaspers said.

By turning to professionals, medical or otherwise, Rainbow Network has been able to meet needs in sustainable ways that can be continued by Nicaraguans in the program, he said.

"Their only hope is the Rainbow Network," he said of the people living in the rural areas of the poorest Spanish-speaking country in the world. "The lucky people live in Rainbow Network communities."