

THE REGION

N.H. eye doctor helps thousands

By HILLARY CHURA
Associated Press

For Randall K. Minard, vacation means fitting 1,000 destitute Mayan Indians with eyeglasses, riding through Guatemala in the back of a pickup truck, and eating lots of beans.

Minard — who grew up in Alstead and graduated from Fall Mountain Regional High School in Langdon — is now an optometrist, with clinics in Concord and Claremont.

For the past six years, he has also set up temporary clinics in Guatemala's western highlands, one of the most destitute regions in one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere.

He spends one to two weeks per

year in Central America. The rest of the time, he collects and sorts thousands of pairs of eyeglasses from charities, gathers equipment and supplies, and enlists people to help on his next trip.

"I really felt there was a need. You just can't walk away from that kind of responsibility," he said.

Minard, 38, goes to Guatemala in December, because that's a slow time at his clinics in New Hampshire and because the harvest is over in Guatemala, so people can take two days off for a trip to Minard's clinic.

In a two-week visit, Minard may see 1,000 to 1,500 people.

His patients, who earn about 55 cents per day, pay 10 cents for an

eye examination and \$1 for a pair of glasses. The payments are important, Minard says: "It maintains their self-esteem, that they are not relying on the gringo. It's kind of a different approach to Third World charity."

Minard works with Caritas, a international Catholic organization with an office in Guatemala. Volunteer health educators screen people throughout the year, so Minard can be as productive as possible when he is there.

He says the approach works better than those of some other well-meaning groups — such as those that blanket an area with notices, then can't deal with the thousands of people who turn out for free eye care.

"These people are used to being

disappointed. A lot of clinics are a one-shot deal," he said.

During his first three visits, Minard became concerned about the number of people with cataracts. He recruited Richard Chace of Portsmouth, an ophthalmologist and surgeon; Chace has since has performed 60 operations on Guatemalans.

One surgery restored the sight of a 27-year-old woman who had never seen her 2-year-old son, a fact she had accepted stoically.

"She was subdued because of the hardships these people have to go through," Chace said. "I wouldn't be surprised if this woman thought her good vision was something that could be taken away from her, probably like most things in her life."

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of Guatemalans

Chace says the Guatemalans' eye problems stem from genetics, poor nutrition and generally poor health care, especially eye care.

Chace and Minard would like to recruit enough doctors to make visits every few months, in teams of up to six people.

The doctors pay for their own \$600 airline tickets to Guatemala. They stay in a convent or a hospital and are fed — beans, tortillas, bananas and papayas. From Santa Cruz, Minard and his colleagues take five-hour bus rides to reach villages. For even longer dusty trips, they use pickup trucks. Minard sits in back on those.

Minard got involved with eye care in Central America through

Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity, based in Taylorville, Ill. Organizer Dianne Johnson says her group mounts 35 missions a year to Central America, Africa and the Philippines.

"You would be surprised how many places in the world where eye care does not exist," she said. "We put glasses on a person, and they can see, and they consider it a miracle."

The choice between working miracles and kicking back at a resort is easy for Minard.

"I would be bored at a place like Club Med. Going to Guatemala is a great way to recognize what I can do in terms of providing a service," he said. "This puts it all in perspective."