Making an appointment with your eye doctor.
Consulting with a plastic surgeon.
It can be easy to take these things for granted. However, if you don’t have access to any kind of medical care, receiving these services can change your whole life.

Two local doctors have made different journeys to countries in other parts of the world to aid suffering people. They have returned home to America with many stories to tell.

A VISION OF SERVICE

Dr. Jason Pingel has just returned to his business, Mission EyeCare, 6120 Johnson Drive, after giving a lecture in San Diego, California. Dr Pingel has traveled the world giving speeches for Johnson & Johnson VisionCare, as well as doing medical missions with Medical Wings International. Regardless of where he has been, he is always glad to be back home.

“I travel about 30 to 40 times a year giving talks about the newest brands of contact lens and the newest advances in eye care,” Dr. Pingel offered. “It’s really interesting to find out what is going on in other practices around the country, and then it’s great to bring that knowledge back here to my patients.”

Dr. Pingel has been practicing in Mission since 2003 and established his own practice about five-and-a-half years ago. He earned his doctorate at the Illinois College of Optometry and received extensive training in ocular disease and emergency eye care. About seven years ago he went on a medical mission to Guatemala with Medical Wings International, an organization of medical professionals that travel to medically unserved populations around the world. Dr. Pingel performed examinations on hundreds during his short time in Guatemala. Many of the people he saw had never had an eye exam before.

“It changes your whole perspective,” Dr. Pingel said. “The experience opened my eyes to a lot of what is going on in the world, and how important it is to give back. We have so much to be grateful for in this country. You see the obstacles that others are overcoming, and it encourages you to tackle your own problems.”

Dr. Pingel said his biggest success story happened in Guatemala when a 6-year-old girl came for an eye exam. Her parents told the doctor that she did not like to play with the other children, or even go outside. Her eyes showed very dim reflex during the exam.

“We grabbed the strongest pair of glasses we had, and when she put them on she immediately started laughing,” Dr. Pingel
HELPING CHILDREN SMILE AGAIN

In Santo Domingo, the capital city of the Dominican Republic, the street outside the hospital is full of anxious people waiting for their number to be called. Some have had serious burns, some are dealing with cleft palates or other physical deformities. For many, this is the first time they have seen a doctor.

The hospital is part of Medical Aid for Children of Latin America (MACLA), a 501 (c) 3 not-for-profit Kansas City-based organization that was developed to treat poor residents in the Dominican Republic and other third-world countries.

Mission resident and city councilman plastic surgeon Dr. Tom Geraghty started MACLA after a trip to the Dominican Republic in 1985. Every February since Dr. Geraghty has taken medical/surgical personnel for two to three weeks to the Dominican Republic to see as many patients as they can.

“I was looking for adventure,” Dr Geraghty replied when asked why he went on that initial trip. “What I found was a lot more rewarding.”

Dr. Geraghty recruited colleagues from all over the country to go on these trips and over the years, more than 800 physicians, nurse anesthetist and nurses have volunteered. Dr. Geraghty with his surgical team has performed over 8,000 operations with MACLA.

“The surgeries have been the most challenging I have ever done, and the most interesting,” Dr. Geraghty explains. “I love the fact that I get to perform these operations. I only wish we could stay longer.”

Dr. Geraghty has seen some truly horrific injuries, including a woman who had her face and left shoulder completely burned, a blind girl who had been kept locked up in the basement of her home and a boy who had acid thrown in his face.

“I will never forget that boy. He was 17 at the time, the same age as my son was,” Dr. Geraghty remembers. “He was really scared when he came in. We spent hours on his surgery and we were able to graft a lot of the skin back to his face and really make a difference. Afterwards, he smiled at me so big, that was a good day. We still share letters and that young man is doing very well today.”

In 2015 Dr. Geraghty retired from his private practice and turned the job of director of MACLA over to Dr. John Quinn, a plastic surgeon who has traveled with Dr. Geraghty since his first trip in 1985. Even though he is retired Dr. Geraghty still makes his pilgrimage every year and will be returning to Santo Domingo next February.

“This is my first calling, it’s the most important work I do so I have to go,” Dr. Geraghty said. “During those weeks, we try to help as many as we can, but they help us just as much. I went there to make a difference, but I was the one that was changed, and I have gotten more than I ever gave.”

MACLA Inc. is a medical organization that uses volunteers at all levels. MACLA is always looking for more doctors, nurses and anesthesiologists, though not all volunteers need to be medical professionals. Volunteers who can translate Spanish to English, perform office duties and other non-medical positions are needed as well. To learn about ways to become involved in Medical Aid for Children of Latin America go to macla.org. While there you can also donate to the cause. MACLA’s budget ranges from $170,000 to $240,000 a year and 90 percent of that comes from private donations. No one with the organization is salaried, and all the patients pay nothing. For more information, send an email to info@macla.org.