



Leslie Cordoba was born with cataracts in both eyes. The two-year-old Colombian girl couldn't navigate her world without her mother or her sisters. After the surgery, she was able to see and immediately began testing out her new-found independence.

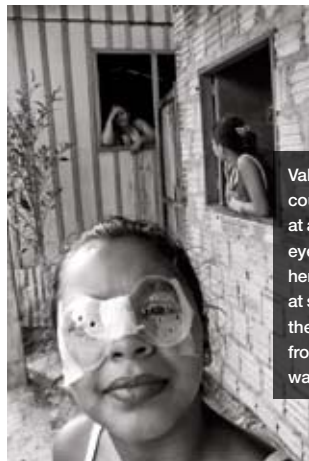
SIGHT LINES

*From darkness to LIGHT.
"Visionary" projects in Colombia.*

BY NOREEN FLANAGAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ELIZABETH OPALENIK & RITA VILLANUEVA

as a child, Elizabeth Opalenik used to practise being blind. She even went to the trouble of learning Braille—just in case she would need it one day. “I have no idea why I thought I might lose my sight, but I still have that Braille card. I’m a photographer, so if I went blind it would be like taking away my life,” she says, pausing before adding that one of the gifts of being involved in an eye project is that you see how people cope when their vision is lost or compromised. “So I guess I would cope too. We ‘see,’ to some extent, with all of our senses.”

The “eye project” that Opalenik is referring to is a two-week volunteer trip organized by Medical Ministry International (MMI; mmint.org), a charity that provides medical and dental services to people in developing countries. I was fortunate to have participated in three missions: two in Colombia and one in Bolivia. Like Opalenik, I also once experimented ▷



Valéria Carmo Fortes could see out of one eye at a time, but her cross-eyed appearance made her the target of ridicule at school. Post-surgery, the 10-year-old beauty from Tabatinga, Brazil, was beaming.

with “blindness.” For one week in junior high school, as part of a class project, I was blindfolded and had to rely on friends and strangers to help me navigate a world that had suddenly become rather confusing and complicated. It gave me a fleeting sense of what it must be like to lose your sight—how vulnerable you feel and how reliant you are on others until you get your bearings.

On these volunteer trips, I work with opticians to fit people with donated prescription glasses. It’s a rare chance to meet hundreds of local people under unique circumstances. In a small way, these glasses give them back their freedom—to work, to read—and their independence. I’ll always remember one man I fitted with what could only be described as “Coke-bottle” lenses. They were women’s glasses, but he didn’t care. He could see. “You have saved me from depression,” he said, explaining that he hadn’t been able to work for the past year because his job involved recording numbers for tiny machine parts. I remember thinking those old glasses probably belonged to someone’s grandmother who had passed away. Now, because someone had taken the time to donate them, they had changed this man—and his family’s life—for the better. I can’t think of a more loving tribute. Every day on these projects I have brief but poignant exchanges that stay with me, whether it’s the little girl who can now see the blackboard at school, the taxi driver who can now read the street signs (gulp!) or the seamstress who can once again thread her needle.

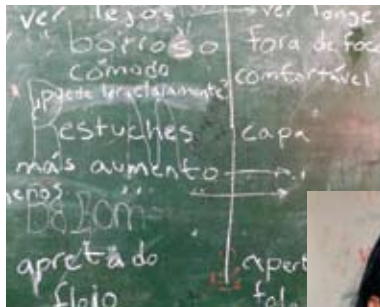
To raise the profile of MMI’s work, Opalenik and fellow photographer Rita Villanueva were invited to join us in Leticia, a frontier town in the Amazon jungle in Colombia that borders Peru and Brazil. They took thousands of pictures, but both said they were drawn to two girls: Leslie Cordoba and Valéria Carmo Fortes. Leslie, who is two years old, was born with cataracts in both eyes. She was basically blind and entirely reliant on her >





OR gear for newbies

Want to donate your old glasses? Mail them to: MMI Canada Warehouse, P.O. Box 56086, Stoney Creek, Ont., L8G 5C9, or email mmican@mmint.org to find local collection points across Canada.



My Spanish and Portuguese cheat sheet!



mother and sisters to guide her. “We believed that she had some visual potential,” explained Dr. Joseph Fammartino, the medical director for the project. “We were able to remove the cataracts and replace the lenses in her eyes. We did one eye first and the second one the following week. The day after the first surgery, she started to see. We could tell because she was now grabbing at our instruments.”

The little girl Opalenik had photographed before the surgery wasn't the same one she saw a few days later. “She wasn't as clingy—she was smiling and wanting to touch everything,” recalls Opalenik. “We had given her a little doll, and her older sister was trying to teach her how to care for a baby. I think she didn't quite realize what a baby was—so she was more interested in the wheels on the little stroller we'd given her. I remember catching that shot of her walking into the light with her buggy and being so moved by that vision of her. This must have been the first time she was able to move around the world by herself. Imagine.”

It was Valéria's dignity and spunk that most impressed Opalenik and Villanueva. The 10-year-old girl had severely crossed eyes. While she had visual potential in both eyes, she could only see with one eye at a time. “If she used the left eye to focus on something, the right eye would wander to her nose,” explains Fammartino. “The surgery to straighten her eyes was mostly cosmetic because she has trained her brain to use one eye at a time, but she'll have some binocular vision.” Opalenik was struck by Valéria's capacity to forgive those who teased her at school. “Her mother said she thought that Valéria would be a politician one day—I wouldn't be surprised. She'd make it even without this surgery, but, that said, her life is going to be different now. This was definitely a life-changing experience for her.”

It's also life-changing to be a volunteer on these trips. On the Leticia project, the clinic served just over 6,000 people. More than 400 surgeries were performed, and in the eyeglasses section we gave out 3,809 pairs of glasses. Other people—many of whom had travelled for days along the Amazon River to get to the clinic—received laser surgery to treat complications from glaucoma and diabetes, while still others were fitted with prosthetic eyes. It's difficult to put into words, but these experiences have been an anchor for me because they provide a meaningful

counterpoint to my life as a magazine editor. Before I arrived in Leticia, I attended Rio Fashion Week in Brazil. At the close of the last runway show, my seat companion turned to me and asked if I'd be heading home. I replied, “No, I'm going to the jungle to hand out glasses.” He paused and then, looking perplexed, asked, “What—of champagne?” □



I was usually in the glasses room, but one day I joined my sister, Jean, who is a physician, in the OR to watch a cataract surgery; my Spanish was useless because Leticia borders Brazil, so I scribbled Portuguese eye-related words on the blackboard; people who live on the Amazon, in homes like this one (above, right), travelled for days to attend the clinic to have surgeries or receive glasses or, in the case of this little boy, a prosthetic eye.



Gorgeous boy!