

Eye specialists convene in El Fuerte, Mexico, to provide vision-saving surgery at no cost to local residents

Follow the journey of the Villaseñors, founders of the El Fuerte Eye Clinic, who this week will evaluate upwards of 500 patients and provide vision-saving surgery at no cost for upwards of 100.



Valley Public Relations

Nov 3



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Nov. 2: Today, the Villaseñors — Ophthalmologist Richard Villaseñor and his wife surgical nurse Maribel Aja-Villaseñor — packed up supplies and traveled by car to Pheonix, AZ, for the first leg of their trip to their own Liga International, Flying Doctors of Mercy, El Fuerte Eye Clinic.



Leaving Los Angeles — The Villaseñors head to Phoenix, AZ, where they will meet with Liga International, Flying Doctors of Mercy volunteer pilots who will

transport them to El Fuerte. Three southern California ophthalmologists and one from Mexico City will join this November mission, volunteering their time: **Dr. Lorena Wheelcock Gutiérrez**, a general ophthalmologist with a specialty in glaucoma and cataract surgery, based in Mexico City; **Dr. Rom. Kandavel**, a specialist in cataract and laser eye surgery, based in Encino, Calif.; **Dr. Mario A. Meallet**, a specialist in comprehensive ophthalmology, based in Burbank, Calif.; and Dr. Jim Syverud, an ophthalmology specialist, based in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Once in Phoenix, the Villaseñors will meet with Liga International, Flying Doctors of Mercy volunteer pilots **Charlie Brown** and **Lawrence Karpurk** who will take them on to El Fuerte.

Also traveling to El Fuerte for this mission, are three southern California-based ophthalmologists and one from Mexico City, all volunteering their expertise: **Dr. Lorena Wheelcock Gutiérrez**, a general ophthalmologist with a specialty in glaucoma and cataract surgery, based in Mexico City; **Dr. Rom Kandavel**, a specialist in cataract and laser eye surgery, based in Encino, Calif.; **Dr. Mario A. Meallet**, a specialist in comprehensive ophthalmology, based in Burbank, Calif.; and **Dr. Jim Syverud** an ophthalmology specialist, now retired from **Valley Eye Associates**, based in Appleton, Wisconsin.

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Once in El Fuerte, the team will meet with local nursing staff — who have been personally trained by Maribel Aja-Villaseñor — to begin evaluating patients. They expect to see upwards of 500 local residents. They will then provide vision-saving surgery to upwards of 100 children and adults, at no cost.

"Recognizing the significant need for vision health care in El Fuerte, Mexico, my husband Dr. Richard Villaseñor and I built and equipped the El Fuerte Eye Clinic in 1994. This small, volunteer-run, state-of-the-art surgical center and clinic serves the residents of El Fuerte and the surrounding region. We provide vision-saving surgical care once a month, for three days, at no cost, October through March."

— Maribel Aja-Villaseñor, co-founder, El Fuerte Eye Clinic

Mexico is one of the 20 countries with the highest number of people affected by visual impairment. They are also among the 20 most populous countries in the world. In 2015, there were more than 2 million people with some form of visual impairment. The prevalence of blindness varies greatly from region to region, from 2.1% in Chiapas to 1.5% in Nuevo Leon. Cataract-secondary blindness averaged 63% nationwide.

In 2013, the total economic costs of blindness and visual impairment in Mexico were quantified at 595 million annually. An additional breakdown quantified the costs of cataract blindness at 250 million each year. ... [People with cataracts live] with great difficulty and their quality of life is seriously affected. Low vision makes it difficult to recognize people's faces to enjoy a television program, use a computer, identify the price on a pricetag, cross the street safely, or drive a vehicle. Fortunately, cataracts can be cured with surgery that takes no more than thirty minutes.

— International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness

(Translated from source: <https://www.iapb.org/news/la-catarata-y-su-impacto-economico/>)

Nov. 3: Today, the Villaseñors met with pilots — who volunteer their services for Liga International, Flying Doctors of Mercy — and were transported from Pheonix to El Fuerte.

Today, the Villaseñors met with veteran Liga International, Flying Doctors of Mercy volunteer pilots **Charlie Brown** and **Lawrence Karpurk**. The duo has been transporting the Villaseñors and Liga International doctors for many years.

Three southern California ophthalmologists and one from Mexico City joined the Villaseñors in El Fuerte to volunteer their expertise: **Dr. Lorena Wheelcock Gutiérrez**, a general ophthalmologist with a specialty in glaucoma and cataract surgery, based in Mexico City; **Dr. Rom Kandavel**, a specialist in cataract and laser eye surgery, based in Encino, Calif.; **Dr. Mario A. Meallet**, a specialist in comprehensive ophthalmology, based in Burbank, Calif.; and

Dr. Jim Syverud an ophthalmology specialist, now retired from Valley Eye Associates, based in Appleton, Wisconsin.



Pilot Charlie Brown Readies his Steed — veteran Liga International, Flying Doctors of Mercy volunteer pilot Charlie Brown makes calculations for weight cargo prior to the flight to El Fuerte. (Source: El Fuerte Eye Clinic)



Ready for Takeoff — The Villaseñors prepare for their flight from Pheonix to El Fuerte. The clinic has been open since 1994 making this somewhere over their 160th flight and mission trip together (but who's counting?). (Source: El Fuerte



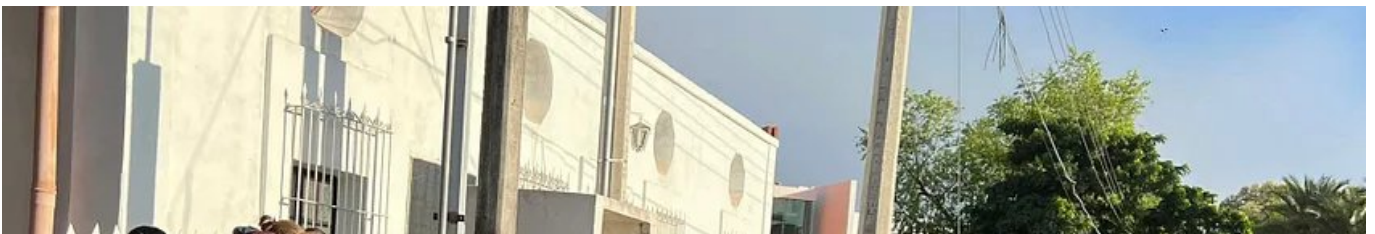
Baggage, Check! — Dr. Richard Villaseñor loads his bags for the trip from Phoenix to El Fuerte. (Source: El Fuerte Eye Clinic)

Nov. 4: Today the team evaluated for vision issues upwards of 500 residents of El Fuerte and surrounding areas.

The most common eye issues we saw during today's evaluations were cataracts, pterygiums, glaucoma and strabismus. Some patients we saw will need an eye prosthesis.

Dr. Jim Syverud — who has more than 50 years of experience in ophthalmology and who joins us three times a year — was instrumental today in performing all of our ophthalmology eye exams. Tomorrow, he will be responsible for applying all the local anesthesia prior to surgery. We are incredibly thankful for his service.

— Dr. Richard Villaseñor, co-founder, El Fuerte Eye Clinic





A Grateful Community — Patients, caregivers, and family members wait outside the El Fuerte Eye Clinic to be evaluated. The clinic's all-volunteer staff evaluated upwards of 500 patients. (Source: El Fuerte Eye Clinic)



Years of Experience — Dr. Richard Villaseñor, the co-founder of the El Fuerte Eye Clinic, evaluates a patient. Dr. Villaseñor has more than 50 years of experience treating diseases, injuries, and trauma of the eye such as glaucoma, cataracts, and pterygiums (Source: El Fuerte Eye Clinic)







A Woman on a Mission — Dr. Lorena Wheelcock Gutiérrez evaluates a patient for glaucoma. This is Dr. Wheelcock Gutiérrez's first mission at the El Fuerte Eye Clinic. In addition to her ophthalmology practice in Mexico City, she has been a staple in the ophthalmology missionary community throughout Mexico for many years.





A Thankful Patient — A gentleman waits to be evaluated at the El Fuerte Eye Clinic to find out if he is a candidate for vision-saving surgery and what kind of care he can expect to receive. (Source: El Fuerte Eye Clinic)

Nov. 5: Today the team rose at 4 am to begin surgery at 5 am. For 12 hours, they provided life-changing surgeries, giving vision to children and adults who previously could not see or who had troubled vision.





Medical Dream Team — The El Fuerte Eye Clinic all-volunteer medical team provided life-changing care, these past few days, to residents of El Fuerte and surrounding areas. The team includes U.S.-based Liga International Doctors of Mercy doctors and nurses as well as local nursing staff personally trained by clinic co-founder Maribel Aja-Villaseñor.



Skilled Nursing Staff — Led by Clinic Co-founder Maribel Aja-Villaseñor — El Fuerte Eye Clinic co-founder and surgical nurse Maribel Aja-Villaseñor prepares for eye surgery with local medical staff she has personally trained. (Source: El Fuerte Eye Clinic)

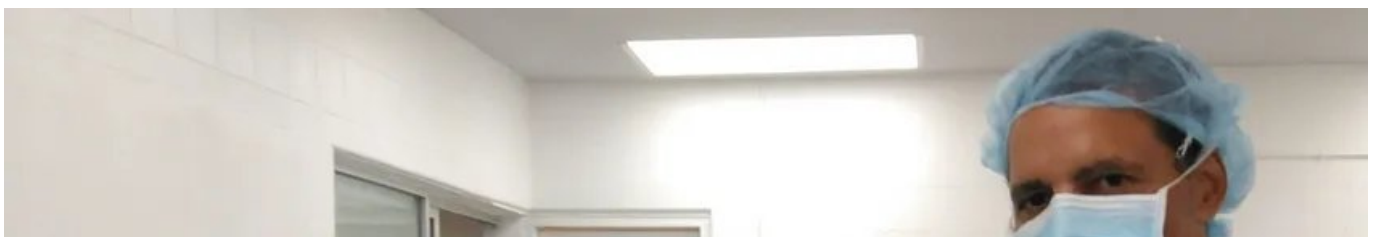




Surgery Day — Joining Dr. Richard Villaseñor in surgery, yesterday, at the El Fuerte Eye Clinic, were three U.S.-based ophthalmologists and one from Mexico City who volunteered their expertise: **Dr. Lorena Wheelcock Gutiérrez**, a general ophthalmologist with a specialty in glaucoma and cataract surgery, based in Mexico City; **Dr. Rom Kandavel**, a specialist in cataract and laser eye surgery, based in Encino, Calif.; **Dr. Mario A. Meallet**, a specialist in comprehensive ophthalmology, based in Burbank, Calif.; and Dr. **Jim Syverud** an ophthalmology specialist, now retired from **Valley Eye Associates**, based in Appleton, Wisconsin.



A Steady Hand — Dr. Rom Kandavel of the Colvard-Kandavel Eye Center, Encino, Calif., performs cataract surgery. This is Dr. Kandavel's second mission trip with the Villaseñors.





Special Care — Dr. Lorena Wheelcock Gutiérrez (far left) and Dr. Mario Meallet (far right) escort a patient to recovery following cataract surgery. (Source: El Fuerte Eye Clinic)

As I write this, the all-volunteer medical team of the El Fuerte Eye Clinic is traveling home after a full day (12 hours) performing life-changing surgery for children and adults of El Fuerte and surrounding areas. Local staff are surely resting.

Joining Dr. Richard Villaseñor in surgery, yesterday, were three U.S.-based ophthalmologists and one from Mexico City who volunteered their expertise: **Dr. Lorena Wheelcock Gutiérrez**, a general ophthalmologist with a specialty in glaucoma and cataract surgery, based in Mexico City; **Dr. Rom Kandavel**, a specialist in cataract and laser eye surgery, based in Encino, Calif.; **Dr. Mario A. Meallet**, a specialist in comprehensive ophthalmology, based in Burbank, Calif.; and **Dr. Jim Syverud** an ophthalmology specialist, now retired from **Valley Eye Associates**, based in Appleton, Wisconsin.

One woman underwent surgery for cataract in her left eye and will return for surgery in her right. Prior to the surgery, she could not see her own hand. A gentleman underwent cataract

surgery to regain his sight after many years of blindness. These were two of many patients who received surgery to address glaucoma, cataracts, and other eye issues.

When you are unable to see, as the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness attests, you lose your ability to function well in your own community. You might lose your job. You may need a family member to take on your care. These changes, the agency says, have a disproportionate impact on impoverished families and communities:

Cataracts don't only impact people's quality of life. Poor vision disables people, so getting work is difficult, and they become part of the economically inactive population. Many times, people must refrain from working to care for their blind relatives, leading another family member to be unable to generate income. The blind patient is more likely to become ill, given his sedentary lifestyle, age, and other comorbidities, therefore it also involves a higher expense for health care. All these accumulated expenditures strongly impact the family, community, and national economy.

— International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness

(Translated from source: <https://www.iapb.org/news/la-catarata-y-su-impacto-economico/>)

The life-changing gift of cataract and other eye surgeries that we perform here at the El Fuerte Eye Clinic cannot be underestimated. Patients are able to return to being productive members of their communities, return to work inside or outside the home, do their jobs more safely if they had continued to work, and more. As well, their caregivers are often relieved of their duties and able to contribute to their families in other ways. Whether that means returning to work and earning an income or focusing their caregiving on their children or other family members.

We are honored to do this vision-saving work.

— Dr. Richard Villaseñor, co-founder of the El Fuerte Eye Clinic, El Fuerte, MX

I've traveled on many mission trips and the El Fuerte clinic is the best run philanthropic endeavor I've ever had the pleasure of working with. Fueled by the energy and love of the Villaseñor family, this clinic reaches so many people in such a passionate way. My son Jayan Kandavel and I worked under their direction helping to perform many vision-saving surgeries in a fantastic few days. This is truly affirmation that the meaning of life is to live in the service of others. I will definitely be traveling back as soon as they will have me. Such a worthy and powerful mission.

— Dr. Rom Kandavel, the Colvard-Kandavel Eye Center, Encino, Calif.

The need for eye care in this region of Mexico has always been pressing. Even more so since the Pandemic forced us to put our travels on hold. The increase in eye related illness is ever more palpable. It has been so exciting to be able to re-engage with the community in El Fuerte and provide an even greater range of eye care. In addition to cataract and pterygium surgery, we have been able to care for more people with glaucoma and for children with strabismus. It feels so good to be back!

— Dr. Mario Meallet, A Center for Vision Care, Burbank, Calif.





An Elated Patient — A woman recuperating the day after her cataract surgery at the El Fuerte Eye Clinic celebrates her improved vision over a cup of coffee at a café in El Fuerte.

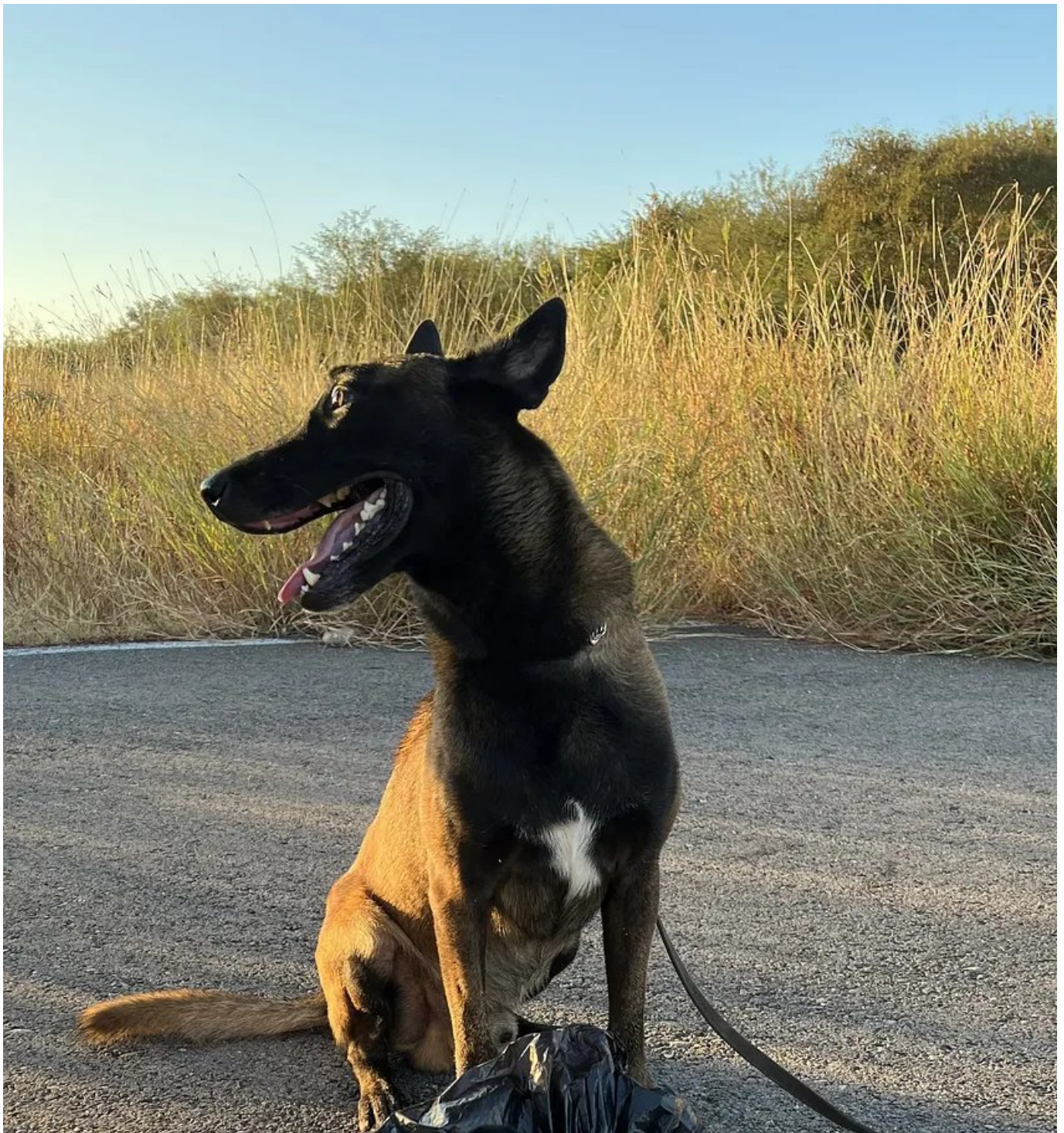


Like Father, Like Son — Dr. Rom Kandavel and his son Jayan Kandavel worked under the direction of the Villaseñors, with Dr. Kandavel performing vision-saving surgeries and Jayan documenting and tracking patient records and surgery schedules. On the surgery day, Jayan celebrated his 16th birthday by assisting patients to and from surgery! This was Dr. Kandavel's second mission trip with the Villaseñors.





Precious Cargo — Liga International, Flying Doctors of Mercy volunteer pilots Charlie Brown and Lawrence Karpurk (the two gentlemen on the right) prepare to transport the Villaseñors along with Mercedes Kay, clinic coordinator (second from left), to Phoenix for their return trip home to Los Angeles.





A Caring Pup — Pup “Sargento” watches on with his Veracruz National Guard handler as the airplane is loaded for the Villaseñors and U.S.-based volunteers’ return flight home. The National Guard aids the Villaseñors coming and going from El Fuerte, for every mission.

About the El Fuerte Eye Clinic

- Richard and Maribel Aja-Villaseñor founded, built, and equipped the El Fuerte Eye Clinic, El Fuerte, Sinaloa, Mexico, in 1994. The original \$100,000 of funding for the clinic was raised by the couple's friends.
- Today, it is a state-of-the-art eye clinic that offers free youth and adult eye surgeries to residents of El Fuerte and the surrounding region. Corporate medical supply donors include Alcon, SEE International, and AmeriCares.
- Leading U.S. ophthalmologists, including many who've trained at UCLA's Doheny Eye Institute, travel to El Fuerte to work with local medical assistants, who have been trained by the Villaseñors.
- Over the course of three days, the staff evaluates and treats upwards of 500 patients and performs an average of 100 eye surgeries. Friday is for eye exams, routine treatments, and triage. The staff operates on Saturday, until the last patient is treated. Sunday is for follow-up and travel.

If you are interested in covering this story in more detail, please contact [Molly McCarthy](#). Interviews and/or a press kit with artwork are available upon request.

To donate to this effort, please visit:

<https://www.ligainternational.org/web/Liga/Pages/Clinics/EyeClinic>

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Dr. Violeta Radenovich (left) joined the El Fuerte Eye Clinic team for the first time this past November. Dr. Violeta is she is the only female Fellowship-Trained board-certified pediatric ophthalmologist in El Paso, Texas. In addition to her private practice, Dr. Radenovich is a Clinical Instructor in the Ophthalmology Department at Texas Tech University.

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