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BACK TO VIETNAM WITH A MISSION

Local Eye Surgeon is trying to set up a free clinic for the impoverished in the nation where he treated soldiers and civilians during the war

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The baby had pus coming out of its eyes, nose and ears. A simple round of antibiotics probably could have saved the child, but by the time they were administered, it was too late. The baby died in Sonny Higginbotham's arms.

It was the height of the Vietnam War, and the child had been dropped off at a Catholic orphanage in the Can Tho area of the country. Robert "Sonny" Higginbotham, then an Army chief flight surgeon, volunteered there during his time off. "I saw war wounds all the time, but that baby ..." Higginbotham said. "That kid would have a 99 percent chance of being alive today."

Most children brought into the orphanage were so sick already that nearly one out of every 10 died before they could get treatment, Higginbotham said.

Memories of the baby and other recollections of extreme poverty in the country have stayed with Higginbotham over the past three decades.

So much so that on Thursday, Higginbotham, now a prominent San Luis Obispo County eye surgeon, will return to Vietnam for the first time since he left 34 years ago. While there, he plans to spend time looking for a place to open an eye clinic that will help serve the poor of Vietnam.

The idea came about a month or so ago, when Higginbotham, 62, was chatting with a friend about the state of eye care in the country. He was already planning to return to Vietnam for a visit when he realized that he could also spend his time exploring the possibility of a free eye clinic.

"They really need some help there," Higginbotham said last week. "They do surgery the old-fashioned way. Stuff we've had here 10 to 15 years, they don't do any of it."

Just as the baby could have been saved with simple medicine, some of the blind in Vietnam could see again with simple surgical procedures.

"One of the neat things about eye surgery is that doctors can make a difference in a short period of time," said Craig Merrill, one of Higginbotham's four partners at Pacific Eye

Surgery. "We can actually stomp out blindness, or at least restore sight in one eye, if we have the manpower and equipment."

Higginbotham said he is excited to return to the country to help people who were once the enemy.

"I don't have any misgivings; I don't have any guilt," Higginbotham said of the war. "I felt that I did a lot of good there. Now there's another opportunity to go over there."

The war was, of course, not all good memories. During Higginbotham's 13-month tour, his helicopter was shot down once -- he was unhurt -- and he treated soldiers for everything from heroin addiction to gaping wounds.

During his two weeks in Vietnam, Higginbotham also plans to spend time sightseeing. He wants to visit the Hanoi Hilton, where a friend -- and Sen. John McCain -- spent time as prisoners of war. He also wants to see if the Catholic orphanage is still there.

And unlike other U.S. veterans who return to the country as a healing experience, Higginbotham doesn't see the trip as closure.

"I see it as a beginning," Higginbotham said. "Not as an ending."

Exploratory trip

If Higginbotham is able to make contacts in Vietnam, he said he should be able to do most of the work to get the clinic open from California. Vendors may donate necessary items. His surgery clinic trades in equipment that is only two years old, which could easily be used there.

It's unclear how the clinic will work or when it might open. The trip will explore whether a clinic is even possible.

Higginbotham is working with the American Academy of Ophthalmology to help make contacts in Vietnam. He is also researching hospitals and doctors.

All four of his partners at Pacific Eye Surgery agreed to volunteer at least one week a year in Vietnam.

"To be able to (operate) just for the sheer joy -- especially for someone who otherwise would not be able to see -- that is just enormously gratifying," Merrill said.

While volunteering, the surgeons would also likely train local Vietnamese doctors so they can continue treatment. Blindness usually occurs in developing countries such as Vietnam because of eye infections that either scar the cornea or cause cataracts, Merrill said. Both are easily treatable with the right medicine and simple surgical procedures. There isn't a lot of postoperative work or lengthy hospital stays, so it's much easier to serve many people during a single week, Merrill said. He estimated that with the right

equipment and help, two to three surgeons operating full-time could perform hundreds of eye surgeries in one week.

The partners at Pacific Eye Surgery don't limit their philanthropy to faraway countries. They also treat disabled patients and volunteer their services to low-income people in San Luis Obispo County.

Helping others is a legacy Higginbotham said he and his wife, Shelly -- a Pismo Beach councilwoman -- are trying to leave to their children.

“My personal opinion,” Higginbotham said, “is that doctors should give something back.”

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