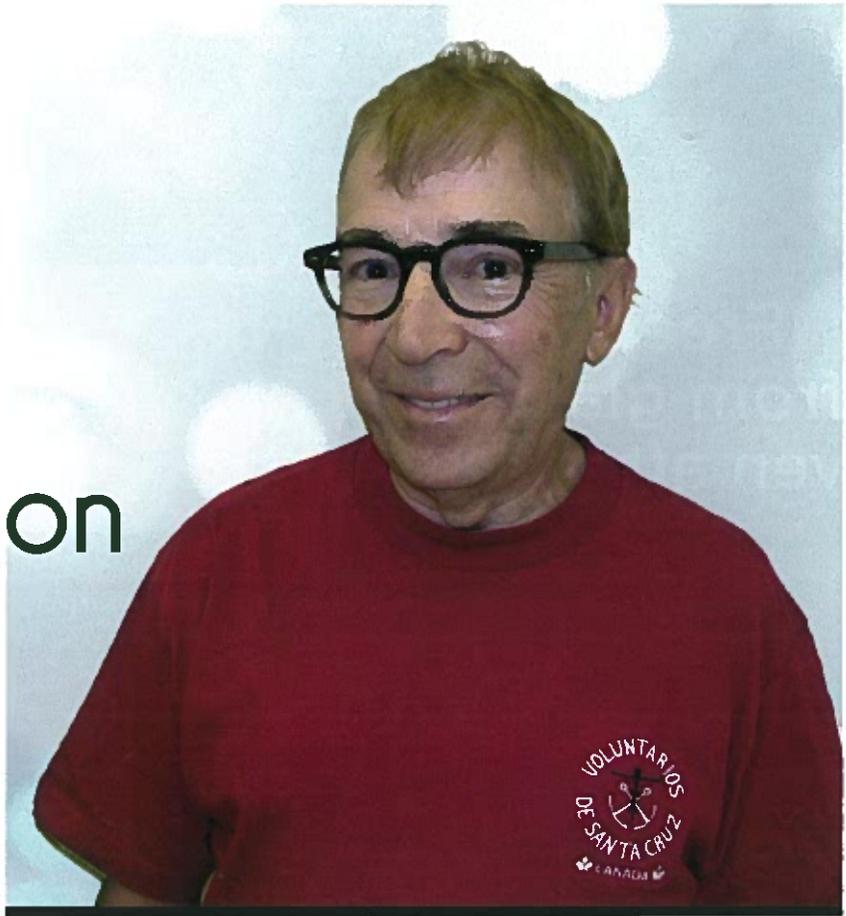


Category:  
Humanitarian

# Claude Chagnon

Claude Chagnon began looking at the world through different-coloured glasses about 10 years ago. That's when he went on his inaugural optical mission to Mexico with a charitable organization called Santa-Cruz. His first big discovery was that he received more than he gave.



“I know I have changed a great deal as a result of this work and I am so thankful for it.”

“We went to a poverty-stricken region of Mexico. One of my first patients was an old man who was very myopic. He was illiterate and I wondered how improving his vision would help him. He was so excited when he got his new glasses and shared with me that he is a farmer and would now be able to see his cows grazing in the mountains.”

Chagnon, born and raised in Saint-Hyacinthe, QC, was imbued with a helpful spirit from an early age. He credits his parents as an important influence. “I heard my mother say many times, ‘We have to give back what life has given to us.’”

When he was 13, Chagnon needed glasses. His father took him to an ophthalmologist who gave him what Chagnon felt to be a cursory examination. “Then I heard from several of my friends that they went to an optometrist, so I asked my dad if I could go, too,” says Chagnon. “I was impressed with the time the optometrist spent with me, and his explanations of my condition. I decided then and there to become an optometrist and never wavered from that goal.” Studies at the University of Montreal’s School of Optometry led Chagnon to his professional designation at age 23.

The optical mission work began about a decade ago when Chagnon was employed at Costco and the departmental administrator there suggested he consider volunteering. Chagnon says he ‘caught the volunteering virus’ and it has stayed with him ever since. “I saw so many people who, although they were just myopic or hyperopic, could not see, study or read,” he says. “Our work helps them to discover the world. It is like putting on a light in a darkened room.”

The experience transformed him. “I discovered how privileged I am and how easy it is to take our many blessings for granted. Going on an optical mission can really change your values and your perception of modern life. I know I have changed a great deal as a result of this work and I am so thankful for it.”

As Chagnon points out, most poor people in the world don’t have the opportunity to see eyecare professionals. “They can’t afford an eye exam and some people don’t even realize that glasses can help them see better.”

To date, he has travelled to Mexico, Ecuador, Romania, Morocco, Tunisia and Peru. Like all volunteers with Oeuvre VOSH Santa-Cruz (the organization is now a chapter of VOSH: Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity), he pays his own airfare plus a \$300 donation to the organization on each trip.

“It’s the need that keeps us going back,” he says. “And the people appreciate it so much: they hug and kiss you, and often they cry. It’s very dramatic and heart warming.”