

## **Our Story: The Beginning**

The Third World Eye Care Society (TWECS) did not begin with a grant or a board meeting — it began with a promise.

It was my grandmother who first opened my eyes to the truth that vision care is not accessible to everyone. She was 92, and although her body was growing frail, her mind and spirit remained strong. She told me how proud she was that I was in optometry school, and then made a heartfelt request.

She asked me to return with her to her small fishing village in Samar Province, Philippines once I graduated, to provide eye exams and eyeglasses to the people she had grown up with — family, neighbours, and friends who had been living in quiet darkness for years. Many of them had never had the opportunity to see clearly.



Growing up in British Columbia, I had taken it for granted that vision care was a basic right, something everyone could access when needed. But my grandmother made me realize this was a privilege, not a guarantee.

Sadly, she passed away before I graduated. We were very close, and I carried the weight of her request in my heart.

Shortly after our wedding, my husband Derrick and I organized what would become our very first TWECS project: a mission to provide eye care to the community living in Smokey Mountain, the massive garbage dump in Manila. We gathered a team of 12 Canadian eye doctors and volunteers, and together we brought vision and dignity to those surviving in unimaginable conditions.

Once the project in Manila was complete, Derrick and I stayed behind. We took a domestic flight, then rode four hours on rough jungle roads to reach my mother's hometown, my grandmother's village. There, in her honour, Derrick and I set up a small clinic and examined eyes, fitted glasses, and fulfilled the promise I had made years earlier.

## **The Warehouse That Built a Movement**

In preparation for that first project, we knew we needed to collect at least 10,000 pairs of eyeglasses in just one year — and we had none to begin with.

At the time, Derrick and I were newlyweds with no car and no disposable income. I knew I needed help. I also knew that Lions Clubs International had a long standing commitment to vision and eye care, so I made the fateful decision to join a local club.

That step changed everything.

Through that connection, we met the Burnaby, Lougheed Lions Club, who had been trying without success to start an eyeglass collection and recycling center. We partnered with them, and they generously offered us a space at Lions Mulberry Place to serve as our eyeglass warehouse. The space was humble, a dusty concrete floor and little else, but it was a start. We often sat right on the floor, sorting through piles of donated eyeglasses.

Then, as it so often happens in this kind of work, help appeared in unexpected ways. A friend of a friend heard about us and offered several old wooden doors. Another generous volunteer stepped up and built makeshift tables from those doors — tables we still use today.

Later, someone else told us that a large quantity of linoleum was being discarded, and asked if we could use it. With the help of Lions Club volunteers, we laid down a patchwork of mismatched flooring. It wasn't pretty, but it covered the cold, dusty concrete, and made the space feel a little more like home.

Meanwhile, we were still figuring out how to actually collect eyeglasses. Derrick and I canvassed service clubs — Lions, Kiwanis, Rotary, and church groups, traveling by bus through rain and snow, often carrying a portable TV and VHS player to show videos (remember it was the early 1990s). We'd go straight from work, making presentations five nights a week, hoping to inspire others to join us.

We were fortunate to gain the support of the **British Columbia Association of Optometrists**, who believed in our mission and promoted our work to their members. Through their encouragement, optometrists across the province began contributing to our projects and collecting eyeglasses on our behalf.

We also reached out to the media, cold calling radio stations, newspapers, and television programs in hopes of sharing our story. To our surprise, we were invited to speak on **CBC National Radio, Peter Gzowski's Morningside** as well as local stations and community news outlets. Their coverage helped amplify our efforts and brought much needed attention to the cause.

## “Keep Going”

A month before our departure, we had reached our goal of over 10,000 eyeglasses, all cleaned, measured, and catalogued by friends, family, and Lions volunteers.

Then something incredible happened.

**Premier Mike Harcourt** heard about our eye project. On the day of our departure, he met us at the airport with a few pairs of his own eyeglasses. He arrived with media crews from two major television stations. Our story aired that evening on the news, and that moment catapulted awareness of our work across the province. Suddenly, we began receiving donated eyeglasses from the general public in huge numbers. We were also blessed when the airline offered complimentary return flights for the entire team. It was overwhelming and deeply affirming.

Looking back, I felt like something was guiding us. Some call it the grace of God, some call it fate. I believe in all of it, and I believe my grandmother, my guardian angel, was with us. Opening doors. Clearing paths. Whispering, “Keep going.”

## Lean In

At the warehouse, we recruited volunteers to sort, clean, measure, and catalog every pair of glasses. We used what little money we raised to buy lensometers, cleaning supplies, and shipping materials. Every dollar went directly into supporting the needs of the next project, nothing was wasted, and every contribution helped bring the promise closer to fulfillment.

But it still wasn't enough.

We used much of our personal savings and paycheques to support the collection and preparation of the eyeglasses and whatever else was needed to make the project a reality. As a result, during our first year of marriage, we had no couch and no bed in our tiny apartment.

Derrick and I made a choice, instead of stepping back, we leaned in. TWECS became our way of life. We poured our time, energy, and hearts into building the Third World Eye Care Society, never pausing to question the sacrifices along the way.

It would be seven years before we started a family, nine before we owned our first car, and fourteen before we had a home of our own.

## **When One Project Becomes a Lifetime**

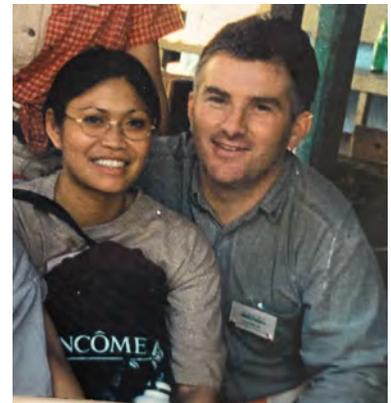
When we returned home from that first mission in 1995, from Smokey Mountain and my grandmother's village, we thought we would finally be able to focus on our newlywed life, start our careers, save for a home, and begin planning for a family.

But something unexpected happened.

We returned to the service clubs and organizations that had supported us, eager to express our thanks and share stories and photos from the Philippines. And to our surprise, something began to stir in the hearts of others. Word had spread from team members who upon returning home, spoke of how powerful it was to help someone who had been struggling in school or in life, finally see clearly, and how deeply moving it was to be part of something greater than themselves.

New volunteers and optometrists began reaching out, offering their time, their skills, and their hands to help us continue the work. More and more people were collecting eyeglasses on our behalf. What had begun as a single, heartfelt project was turning into something bigger than we imagined.

Suddenly, we found ourselves at the warehouse two to three times a week, sorting glasses, training volunteers, and responding to a growing wave of support, all while continuing to pick up eyeglasses and give presentations across the city, and sometimes traveling to towns throughout the province.



In 1997 we became the first non American chapter of VOSH International, under the name VOSH British Columbia. This was a significant milestone. Through VOSH International we gained access to insights from navigating customs procedures to setting clear guidelines for team members. It became a vital resource that helped us grow, connect, and strengthen the work we were already doing.

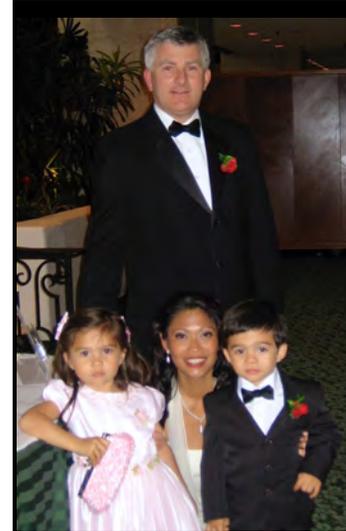
In 2015, students from the University of British Columbia approached TWECS with the idea of starting a campus chapter. Inspired by our work, they wanted to contribute in a meaningful way. Since then, the UBC TWECS chapter has raised funds, collected eyeglasses on campus and volunteered regularly at our eyeglass warehouse. They've helped raise awareness of our work and the need for old eyeglasses within the UBC community.

## The EyeBall

Within two years of founding TWECS on May 23 1995, we realized we needed a way to sustain our work without draining our personal finances. So we decided to host a fundraiser. We thought small to start: a banquet room for 100 people at a local hotel. We were confident we could at least fill it with friends, family, and colleagues.

We did everything ourselves, the old fashioned way. In the comfort of our tiny apartment, I typed and printed every invitation, while Derrick folded, sealed and stamped each one. We sent out over 200 invitations to everyone we knew and to as many optometrists and ophthalmologists across British Columbia as we could find. The response was overwhelming. Before the event even arrived, we had to move it to a larger banquet hall that could accommodate 150 guests.

We convinced a band of musical medical doctors to perform that night. In the weeks leading up to the event, before, between, and after seeing patients, I spent hours cold calling hotels, restaurants, and just about every business listed in the Yellow Pages, asking for auction donations. Many said yes. Friends and colleagues generously pitched in with their own items. And somehow, it all came together.



That first event was the inaugural black, tie **EyeBall** and it set the tone for what would become a beloved tradition. The next year, the EyeBall grew to 250 guests, selling out quickly, with over 40 auction items, a live band, and incredible entertainment. By the 10th year, it had expanded to 350 guests, and was widely recognized as a highlight of the season for the optical industry.

The event wasn't just a fundraiser, it became a celebration of compassion and community, a reunion for team members who had served on projects, and a chance to share our mission with new supporters.

The support we received from the medical and optical industry was extraordinary. Companies sponsored tables, and year after year, we were gifted incredible auction items — including trips for two to Italy, stunning diamonds and jewels and rare memorabilia connected to legendary figures like Rosa Parks and Muhammad Ali. We'll never forget the time Elton John donated a pair of his concert stage eyeglasses. We waited in nervous anticipation for the FedEx package from the Elton John Foundation in London. It arrived less than 24 hours before the event. When it was presented to EyeBall guests those glasses were auctioned off for \$3,000 at our very first EyeBall.

The EyeBall was never just about raising money, it was about fuelling a movement, lifting each other up, and celebrating the power of collective vision

## Reflection

It's hard to believe we've been doing this work for over 30 years. We never imagined how far it would take us — or how many lives it would touch. Since that first journey in 1995, we've traveled to 19 countries, reaching the farthest corners of the world where vision care is only a dream.

Along the way, more than 1,000 volunteers have walked beside us — some sorting eyeglasses late into the night, others quietly picking up eyeglasses, one box or one bag at a time. Some have rallied their communities to collect, while others have left the comforts of home to join us on distant soil.

Together, we've brought restored sight to over 110,000 people, and with it, the dignity, confidence, and hope that comes from finally being able to see the world clearly.

We don't remember the hard work. We don't dwell on the many long nights spent in the eyeglass warehouse, sorting, cleaning, measuring and bagging eyeglasses sometimes into the early hours. We don't reminisce about the exhaustion of traveling across the province giving presentations to schools, churches, service clubs, hoping to inspire a few more people to believe in what we were building.

We don't often talk about the heartbreak, like the pain of leaving our toddler twins Evan and Emma for two weeks, the moments when the pain felt so heavy that I didn't want to go and thought about walking away from TWECS altogether.



We don't hold onto the frustration and anxiety of packing 10,000 eyeglasses and delicate optometric equipment into 25 boxes, wondering if we'd forgotten anything critical, if we'd missed a customs document or an official letter that could mean the confiscation of everything. We don't remember the nerves of praying that the customs officer on duty would show compassion and let us pass without hassle, without heartbreak.

No, we don't remember those things.

We remember the volunteer who was willing to drive across the city, just to pick up one donated pair of eyeglasses. We remember the optometrist who found the strength to leave her three year old son crying at the airport, clinging to her leg, as she boarded a plane with a team of strangers, bound for a village where people were waiting to see for the very first time.

We remember the laughter in the warehouse, the tears of joy in the clinics, the bond that forms when people come together to do something bigger than themselves, and the lifelong friendships that have blessed our lives along the way.

**That's what we carry with us.  
That's what makes it all worth it.**

