

## **What I Did This Summer**

Maybe you saw the same 60 Minutes program that I did last March. It was about an organization called Remote Area Medical (RAM) that provides medical services to people in rural areas of the United States.

I was touched by the story of a woman whose “glasses didn’t work anymore.” In tears, she said she hated asking for help but had no other option. She just didn’t have the money to replace her glasses. As I watched her story I thought I could make a difference. So I went online to volunteer my skills to RAM and I invited my friend Bob Levine, OD (PEN member San Rafael) along for the adventure.

We were enlisted to help in RAM’s largest event the following July. Bob and I left San Francisco airport very early and we arrived at the Tri Cities Airport, Tennessee at 6:00 PM on a Thursday evening ready and willing to participate. After a one hour car ride north and we were in Appalachian country...it was beautiful and, thankfully for us, so was the weather. RAM’s organization was all in place, all we had to do was be ready to work the next morning.

Friday morning the alarm went off at 5:15 AM (2:15 California time) and we were off to the fair grounds to be indoctrinated into the RAM program. Bob was set up, along with a half dozen other volunteer optometrists, in a large barn like building and I headed out to the optical “wedding” tent.

The tent was very organized; they were obviously very experienced at this. After a thorough eye exam, each person that needed services began their optical experience at the registration table. Then they were off to my table for a frame select and measurement of PD and seg heights as necessary.

The other volunteers were largely members of Lions Club from the state of Virginia and their enthusiasm was infectious. We were all there to help and that’s what we did.

We fit nearly 1,000 people with glasses over the three-day event. The vast majority of patients had their prescriptions filled right on site within a few hours. Optical volunteers from the state of Virginia handled the glasses that needed to be ordered. While simple, over the counter readers were dispensed right on the spot.

The patients I worked with were in some ways what you might expect, poor people living off the support of government agencies. Many were working poor who had no other health care option. However, I was shocked by the number of patients who has jobs such as construction or mid level management and had full time jobs.

One patient, a waitress working 6 days a week, had waited twelve hours in line for dental care but she was unable to be seen due to the sheer number of dental patients. Perversely her need was not great enough; she needed a simple filling while too many others needed full extractions or such extreme work that they had to be seen first.

Thankfully in the vision area no patient was turned away; everyone who needed care received it. The woman with a prescription of OD -4.00 and OS -5.00 received her first pair of glasses. She had stopped driving because when cars finally came into her view it scared the heck out of her. Her greatest excitement was her ability to now see the birds feeding in her back yard. My skills, that I often take for granted, changed this woman's life.

The organizers were shocked that people had come all the way from California to help them. And over and over again I was thanked and blessed by the patients I helped. But I just felt like I was doing my very small part.

My request of each of you who read this article is to ask you to do your part too. Right now the greatest need is for ophthalmic lenses. Could you order a few single vision or flat top bifocal blanks and donate them? Do you have an in-office lab that you no longer utilize? Could you donate frames? There is always a need for a financial donation or your time. Please visit the RAM website at [www.ramusa.org](http://www.ramusa.org) to see what you can do to help.

Note: Remote Area Medical (RAM) is a non-profit, volunteer, relief corps dedicated to providing free health care, dental care, and eye care to people in remote areas of the United States and the world. Volunteers participate at their own expense and medical supplies, medicines, facilities and vehicles are donated resulting in out-of-pocket costs to RAM that average less than \$2 per patient!