

Eye Doc with Heart

Braving danger and bearing glasses, she helps the vulnerable survivors of a gruesome war

Cheryl Landry has shone her penlight into the eyes of thousands of Bosnian children, but she doesn't let herself dwell on what they've seen. "If I had to stop and think about all the sad stories, I wouldn't be able to function," says Landry, 43.

An optometrist in Woonsocket, RI, Landry stumbled upon her overseas calling in April 1996. While reading through an optometry journal, she noticed a recruitment ad for medical professionals to treat refugees in Bosnia. When she called for information, Landry learned that the relief organization didn't have an established program. But, if she could pay her own travel expenses—and bring all the necessary equipment—the organization's volunteers would help her reach refugees once she got there.

When Landry told her parents and her husband, George Rouse, that she wanted to go, "it went over like a lead balloon." Rouse, a computer software consultant, says he wasn't surprised by his wife's plan. "But I *was* concerned about her safety," he notes.

Nonetheless, Landry forged ahead, launching a drive to collect used eyeglasses. Friends, strangers, and eyeglass companies from Maine to Alaska ultimately donated 7,000 pairs. During the four days prior to her flight, Landry's family, patients, and colleagues worked around the clock in her living room to clean, label, and bag the lenses. "Those last few days were killers," she says.

Soon after she landed in Split, Croatia, Landry was stopped by soldiers on the Bosnian-Croatian border. All 18 boxes of eyeglasses



Cheryl Landry in her Woonsocket, RI, office with lenses donated for her missions.

that she'd brought were confiscated. Undaunted, Landry started examining patients at orphanages, asylums, and camps the next day, as planned. When her supplies were located several days into her trip, she returned to fill prescriptions.

"People were very grateful," says Landry. "You'd get kissed or they'd break out in huge smiles. It was really satisfying." But her accomplishments were bittersweet: In a region where a

single pair of glasses costs a month's salary, Landry could meet only a fraction of the need. "When I tried to leave, people were running after me yelling, 'Doctor! Doctor! Please, please,'" she recalls.

To manage the overwhelming demand, Landry focused on the war's youngest survivors during her next three trips, which were sponsored by the Bosnian Children's Fund. Even though she saw up to 90 kids a day, a few stand out in her mind. There was the 5-year-old girl whose severely crossed eyes straightened instantly with proper lenses. And the little boy she met at an orphanage who'd been found in a garbage can; he was farsighted, but had been wearing lenses designed for someone with severe nearsightedness.

Landry's husband has accompanied her on the last two trips, and the couple will travel to Kosovo this spring to provide lenses for the refugees there. "It's not that she's totally fearless or anything," says Rouse when asked about his wife's latest project. "But if she decides to do something...she'll do it."

—Carolyn Edy



Snapshots from Landry's trips: Below, one of many Bosnian homes bombed during the war. At left, Landry with a few of the refugees she has helped.

