In April 2013, a crisp morning breeze greeted riders — 595 in all — as they unloaded their bikes for the second annual Bike for Sight charity ride. Whether avid cyclists, recreational riders or novices, all were prepared to ride 5, 10, 20 or 40-miles to help an Ethiopian man, woman or child living needlessly blind.

For the 595 riders represented 595 patients in Ethiopia who would receive the Gift of Sight from the hands of Michael Feilmeier, M.D., and the team of surgeons that would join him the following March (2014) in Arba Minch, Ethiopia.

Dr. Feilmeier is the Medical Director of the Global Blindness Prevention Division at the Truhlsen Eye Institute. Two years earlier, he and his wife, Jessica, launched the Bike for Sight charity ride to give Nebraskans the opportunity to be a part of the most moving surgery he’s ever performed, a surgery that can be completed in five minutes, has the consumable cost of roughly $20 and can restore sight.

Sutureless Extracapsular Cataract Extraction (SECCE) has become the gold standard in countries like Ethiopia, which struggle with a nearly insurmountable backlog of blinding cataracts and a shortage of trained ophthalmologists.

With check-in complete, riders take to their bikes. Helmets snap, shoes click-in and the force of 595 feet coming down on their pedals sets not only bikes in motion, but the planning for the surgical outreach in Ethiopia.
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With more than 93 million inhabitants, Ethiopia is the world’s most populous land-locked country. It’s also thought to have one of the world’s highest rates of blindness. Millions are estimated to be living with little to no vision and without access to eye care.

Arba Minch, March 2014 - A three-member, Truhlsen Eye Institute (TEI) surgical team comprised of Dr. Feilmeier and ophthalmologists Drs. Sriranjani Padmanabhan and Anna Stagner, arrive to Arba Minch, Ethiopia. Joined by affiliated Himalayan Cataract Project (HCP) ophthalmologist, Dr. Huck Holtz, the team settles into their hotel. Although weary from 40 hours of travel, they are quickly revived by the Ethiopian coffee and begin to organize the desired surgical flow for the following day.

Organizing surgery for hundreds of patients is no small task. The work, championed by HCP, actually began months earlier when local Ethiopian ophthalmic assistants advertised the surgical camp, recruited droves of patients for screening and selected more than 600 patients for the life-changing surgery. Only patients with cataracts that had degraded vision to hand-motion or light-perception levels were selected for surgery as they stood the most to gain from restored sight.

“Arriving to the outreach, I was instantly impressed by the tenacity of the patients,” said TEI Global Blindness Prevention Fellow Dr. Padmanabhan. “Some told us that...”
they had walked days to reach a screening site before being selected and bused to camp. Many had been blind for years, some more than a decade. One man had children whose faces he had never seen. While each person’s account was different they all were willing to risk everything they had for a chance to make it to the operating table.*

The clinic staff rescreened the patients, prepared them for the OR, administered the retro bulbar blocks, safely lifted them on and off operating tables and assisted the surgeons.

*The surgeries were not straightforward cases,” said Dr. Stagner, a third-year TEI resident. “Cataracts complicated by trachoma and the high prevalence of pseudoexfoliative glaucoma, combined with the difficulties of operating by flashlight when the power would give out made each case seemingly more difficult than the last. It’s a true test of mental fitness and the skill of our attendings that we had such great surgical outcomes for all of the patients.”

Regardless of the challenges, the rewards were great when, the following day, patients lined the walkway of the courtyard to have their eye patches removed.

Patient-by-patient, the surgeons removed the patches and inspected the eye to ensure the surgery was free of complications. One-by-one, patients would blink back at them before taking in the sight of the sky, the color of the dirt and the wrinkles on their own hands before a smile would spread across their face.

*There is no better way to start a day halfway around the world from your family and the comforts of home than watching the overwhelming joy, happiness and thankfulness of someone who is realizing they can see again,” Dr. Feilmeier said.

Over four days a total of 670 men, women and children had their sight restored.