ALEX LECHTMAN, MD, has a comfortable plastic surgery practice in Visalia, providing operations that are largely elective. But for years he has put aside the comforts of home to travel to Mexico where he and a volunteer medical team called Interface provide life-changing facial surgeries for children.

This year, Dr. Lechtman was met in La Piedad, Mexico, by 150 patients waiting for the miracle workers who would restore their faces and their futures.

“We did 83 operations in two days,” Dr. Lechtman recalled. “It is an incredible opportunity to take what we have learned into this area of the world where children couldn’t otherwise access these skills, and to give back to them what was given to me in my education.”

The team consisted of seven plastic surgeons, five anesthesiology providers, a speech therapist, a translator, operating room nurses, technicians and recovery room nurses.

Their main focus each year is generally cleft lip and cleft palate surgeries, he explained.

“In this area of central Mexico, the people are of Incan and Mayan descent and are genetically predisposed to cleft lip and palate,” Dr. Lechtman explained. “They also suffer from a lack of B vitamins because it is difficult to grow green leafy vegetables in their mountains.”

A cleft lip is a physical split or separation of the two sides of the upper lip and appears as an opening or gap in the skin of the upper lip. This separation often extends beyond the base of the nose and includes the bones of the upper jaw and/or upper gum.

A cleft palate is a split or opening in the roof of the mouth; it can involve the hard palate (the bony front portion of the roof of the mouth), and/or the soft palate (the soft back portion of the roof of the mouth).

The result of this birth defect is an otherwise permanent disfigurement and a wide variety of resulting health issues.

“These children are often shunned in society because of the birth defect—which some consider a curse,” Dr. Lechtman said. “They don’t go to school and they are kept in the house. With repair, they are more socially accepted so they can get an education and get married—all the things we take for granted. The parents experience a huge sense of relief that their children came through the surgery well and that there are options open to them.”

Cleft lip and palate patients require a series of surgeries in order to build facial structures, as well as speech therapy. The Interface team has been traveling to La Piedad for 27 years, and that continuity is essential to their patients’ ongoing care.

“It helps alleviate the parents’ uncertainty, knowing that the Interface team will be back for follow-up surgeries and that we connect them with local caregivers,” Dr. Lechtman said. “We help them understand post-surgical care and what to expect. We see the same kids many times and get to know them pretty well.”

The Interface team is a group of “incredible human beings,” and Dr. Lechtman welcomes the opportunity to work with and learn from them. Plastic surgery lends itself well to such humanitarian efforts because it requires a reasonably small set of tools and equipment and the post-operative recovery time is one night, at most.

“We utilize the standard operating techniques of plastic surgery and we do amazing things for these kids. Other surgical procedures would require too much equipment or too much recovery time.”

Without physicians such as Dr. Lechtman and the Interface team, these children face shortened life spans, eating problems, ear infections and hearing loss, speech problems and dental problems. Cleft lip and palate is the fourth most common birth defect in the United States, and so is not uncommon locally, Dr. Lechtman added.

“We have a cleft lip and palate panel here in Tulare County—the only one between Los Angeles and Madera,” he noted. “It is funded through California Children’s Services and Kaweah Delta Medical Center and is designed to provide services to lower-income families facing disabling medical conditions.”

Genetics play a part, he reiterated, making it simply “the luck of life.”

PICTURED: Alex Lechtman, MD, performs surgery on a child born with a cleft lip during his most recent trip to La Piedad, Mexico. The conditions of the operating room are quite unlike those of the Sequoia Surgery Center, where Dr. Lechtman performs plastic surgery in Visalia. Plastic surgery requires little equipment and offers a quick recovery, making it the perfect specialty for changing lives.
the draw” for some people. It is more common in Hispanics and Asians, followed by Caucasians. People of African descent have the lowest genetic risk.

Dr. Lechtman is a graduate of the UC San Diego School of Medicine, where the Interface program began. He then served his general surgery internship, his residency in general surgery and then plastic surgery at UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento. He is certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery and has been since 2000.

Since 1999, Dr. Lechtman has practiced at The Aesthetic Center of Visalia Medical Clinic. His practice is physically separate from the large medical clinic in the beautiful Mission Oaks office complex. He performs surgery at Sequoia Surgery Center, a small, privately owned center of surgical excellence in Visalia.

Dr. Lechtman was drawn to plastic surgery by his interest in the management of wounds and the surgical correction of wounds, and the “huge change” that his techniques can make in the lives of his patients through both reconstructive and cosmetic surgeries.

A job offer 12 years ago brought him to Visalia and he readily acknowledges that he had no plans to stay. But Visalia won him over.

“Visalia is a really nice place to live and a great family town,” Dr. Lechtman said. “It is very warm and accepting and it offers ease of life – I work just one mile from my office, and I practice at just one hospital that is five miles from home. I can make reservations for the theater and dinner and not worry about having traffic as I cross town. It’s a wonderful place to live.”

Dr. Lechtman is also active in the Congregation B’nai David, and has served for several years as chairman of the fund-raising committee. Through the committee’s efforts, $700,000 has been raised in just four years and the congregation now enjoys a nearly 5,000-square-foot building for education and activities.

Life in La Piedad, Mexico, is truly a world apart from the comforts of life in Visalia. But for Dr. Lechtman, it is a long and tiring weekend that is very much worthwhile.

“The people we meet … the people we care for, and the chance to learn from other medical professionals on the team – it is so rewarding,” Dr. Lechtman concluded. “I try to go every year, and I am always excited to be back.”