

## Ship Report

18 November 2005 | Monrovia, Liberia



### Mercy Ships sets up dental clinic at Monrovia hospital

John S. Morris has worked in Redemption Hospital's dental unit for nearly 15 years. Even throughout Liberia's civil war, he showed up at the hospital. It doesn't matter to John that there is no dentist for him to work alongside. He still comes to work and extracts teeth day after day, hoping that things will change—that there will someday be money to hire a dentist and to buy materials.

Redemption Hospital does well with its limited resources; it is well-run, orderly, and immaculate. Its staff members are committed to their work. But it can only do so much in this war-ravaged nation, where recent figures estimate that there are only 55 physicians and two dentists across the entire country.

Needless to say, most people in Liberia have never gone to a dentist.

On 16 November, the Mercy Ships dental team opened a clinic at Redemption Hospital. They set up three makeshift rooms, complete with dentistry instruments and equipment and portable examining chairs, that can accommodate as many as five dentists. Space is limited, but the team is positive. Dominique Vonnez, Dental Coordinator,

asserted, *"It's going to be small, it's going to be challenging. But we will make it work."*

The team's efforts are enthusiastically received by those seeking help. *"They are so happy. They've been suffering for so long,"* noted Agnes Henneh, a translator from Monrovia, sitting just a few feet away from a girl who is seeing a dentist for the first time.

Over the course of the ship's seven-month stay in Liberia, the dental team will treat more than 3,000 patients and perform as many as 10,000 procedures. The team—made up of dental professionals from around the world and assisted by a group of Liberian translators—will treat up to 35 people each day.

*"There are so many problems that we can only do a limited amount for each patient,"* stated Timothy Ashworth, a volunteer dentist from England. *"So we're trying pain relief at the moment, and while pain relief is going on, trying to deal with one or two of the other problems that might have developed. That's our call at the moment—and just to show the love of Jesus in the best way we can. And pain relief is a pretty good way of doing that."*





## A new way of looking at things

Seventeen years and nearly 6,000 miles separate their experiences, but Reuben and Valerie have a lot in common—much more than you can see.

You can't even see it in their eyes. Not anymore, that is.

Reuben, an eight-year-old from the outskirts of Monrovia, Liberia, came to the Mercy Ship *Anastasis* on 10 November, having been selected to receive life-changing surgery. Reuben was born with strabismus, more commonly known as crossed eyes.

Valerie Cox teaches the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade class in the 48-student onboard school. She came to the ship in August 2005 from Texas. In particular, she was intrigued by the fact that Mercy Ships provided surgeries for people with eye impairments—issues that caused them difficulty and made them objects of ridicule.

Valerie, too—half a world away—spent her earliest years dealing with strabismus.

*“I was very much a keep-to-myself person. I tended to avoid new situations, where I'd come into contact with new people,”* she said. She was nervous about having surgery to correct the problem, but she wanted very much to have it taken care of; intelligent and

imaginative, she even dreamed up ways that she might be able to fix it herself. *“I remember thinking if I could just mix the right combination of things—the magic potion—and put it on my eye, then that would fix it.”*

She never found the magic potion. But in 1988, when she was 12 years old, Valerie underwent surgery to correct the strabismus. Today she is a vibrant, outgoing woman spending a year away from her home in the United States, volunteering in West Africa. She asked, as part of the ship's “Adopt a Patient” program, to be paired with someone who had strabismus. During the first week of onboard operations during the field service in Liberia, Valerie received word that a patient was coming that day—and that she could come visit him that evening on the ward, as he prepared to undergo surgery.

Reuben was shy. In fact, he didn't really speak at all. He answered most of Valerie's questions with just a slight movement of his mouth; he barely made a sound. His demeanor was that of someone who had endured countless harsh words and glances; without a doubt, his eight years had been filled with them.

The story was a familiar one to Valerie, and she hoped she could provide some comfort to Reuben. *“I just wanted to let him know he's not the only one going through that. I just wanted to be there, help him through any fears he had.”*

Reuben walked down the ship's gangway 36 hours later, along with members of his family. The patch was off his eye. He still looked afraid, and he still didn't speak. But he was about to walk down the pier, toward the gate, and into a whole new reality. *“He has been scorned by his friends,”* declared his father, Ben. *“[This] will change his life.”*

And if the transformation Valerie Cox experienced is any indication, Reuben's father is right.