

Ship Report

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Photos: Scott Harrison, Mercy Ships International

Deck department continues orphanage project

A year ago, Tony van Alstine first laid eyes upon the Victoria Thomas Orphanage. The Mercy Ships deckhand looked around the place — home to nearly 60 orphaned Liberians — and found it “simultaneously heartbreaking and heartwarming.” He saw children who were, he says, well-fed, well-dressed, educated, and joyful, despite the fact they were living, alongside their caretakers, in six cramped rooms inside a mud hut.

During Liberia’s civil war, “Mama Victoria” Thomas took it upon herself to care for several orphaned and abandoned children. Before long, their numbers grew. At some points, Mama Victoria was caring for more than 150 kids, working diligently to keep them fed, clothed, and safe from the terrors of war.

In 2000, when the civil war was raging around them, Mama Victoria relocated many of the children from Monrovia to the town of Kingsville #7, about 90 minutes outside of the city. A man agreed to rent land that she could build on, but when she did put up a structure, he wrested the property back from her. She and the children had to leave. Mama Victoria, however, persisted. She cashed in her savings and purchased land, and there she oversaw the

construction of a new building, made of mud, sticks, and tarpaulin.

Still, Mama Victoria hoped for more for the children. A few years after establishing the Kingsville site, she called on them to work with her to build a 3,500 square foot foundation; they’d make it out of mud bricks. They did so, but when the rainy season came, all they’d done was washed away.

The following year, in 2005, Mama Victoria determined to try again. This time, she said, “*We’re going to work harder and pray harder.*” She and the children started getting up at 5:30 in the morning to pray.

Then, as if on cue, van Alstine heard about the orphanage. He visited to see if he and the other deckhands onboard the *Anastasis* could help. Soon, crewmembers were going to “Mama Victoria’s” regularly to work. Their first project was to seal the foundation with cement, to keep it from being destroyed by the rains. But it didn’t end there. Assisted by donations from friends, family, and churches at home, as well as by Liberian businesspeople, they raised approximately \$20,000 US in cash and materials. Over the three months the Mercy Ship stayed in Liberia, the group, along with the help of local workers, built a spacious 12-room structure for the children and their caretakers to live in.



There was even room for a church.

Willy, Mama Victoria's son, oversees operations at the orphanage; he is also in the middle of a four-year seminary program. In the meantime, however, he's already a pastor. In a large multi-purpose room in the new building, Willy has founded "Potential Life Chapel." He teaches the orphans from the Bible, and he especially instills in them hope in God.

Van Alstine tells a story that captures Willy's love for these children and his desire to see them flourish. Mercy Ships crew showed a movie about the biblical character Moses. "About five of the kids were named Moses, so they were pumped," van Alstine says. But the real impact came after the movie, when Willy addressed the children.

"Moses was an orphan, too, but God had a plan for his life," Willy told them. "He used Moses to free people from their bondage, and he can use you, too."

When the Mercy Ship returned to Liberia for its second field service last fall, the deck department returned to the Victoria Thomas Orphanage. They found things running well and that Willy had taken the initiative to use leftover funds and materials to build a six-room school. But there was still plenty of work to be done, both at the Kingsville "country" orphanage and the "city" branch in Monrovia.

So the team set to work again. In the city, they've built a boys' dormitory, installed a fresh water wall, and completed other improvements at the church and school adjoining the orphanage. And in the country, where the majority of their time is spent, they're completing a long list of projects: building a latrine, adding a covered porch to the main building and plastering the building both inside and out, and constructing a small office for Willy. They have donated a generator, as well, and are wiring for electricity; the children will, for the first time,

be able to study and play by electric light in the evenings.

Over the course of the ship's two visits to Liberia, the deck department has poured nearly \$30,000 US in cash and materials, not to mention countless hours of work, into the two orphanages.

They found the Victoria Thomas orphanages in able, loving hands; they will leave them in the same. Willy Thomas knows each of the children in Kingsville "by name, by attitude, by voice."

"It's a task given to me by God, so I love it. I don't think I have anything to do outside the orphanage."

