

Small Blessings



Blessing before his surgery...



...and after. Now he can drink from a bottle and gain weight for more surgeries in 2007.

Princess didn't name her son until after he was born. I imagine he cried like most babies upon birth. If so, the three divisions of his upper lip went in different directions and the double clefts from his mouth to his eyes would have been clearly visible.

She named him Blessing.

When I met Princess and Blessing in the ward the day before he went into surgery, he laughed and cooed like any baby. Except his upper lip split out towards the corners of his mouth, and I could see into his sinuses. His laugh was wonderful, though. I couldn't help but laugh with him.

Blessing was born with an extremely rare facial deformity called bilateral oro-ocular clefts. His has a gap from mouth to eye on both sides, and he had almost no hard palate. His left eye was covered by a thin later of skin from his cheek up; the eye is blind. Oro-ocular cleft occurs in less than 5 of 100,000 births; in layman's terms, it's incredibly infrequent.

Fortunately, both visiting plastic surgeon Dr. Tertius Venter from South Africa and the resident Chief Medical Officer,

Dr. Gary Parker, had helped patients like Blessing before, and together performed the intricate surgery needed. They repaired the soft tissue on the infant's lips, nose and eyes. He will have several follow-up surgeries to construct a palate and make further improvements to his face when Mercy Ships returns to Liberia in 2007.

Photos by Debra Bell

Blessing was only two months old when he first came to Monrovia for the Mercy Ships. The mother and son travelled for three days over land from Liberia's remote Maryland County seeking the specialized surgery that their local hospital could not provide. They missed the screening day, but Princess followed up on the possibility of aid. He was so little for his age, people wondered if he would survive the four month wait. He did, and the pair returned to Monrovia for Blessing's first repair surgery. Princess remembers smiling when she saw the Anastasis. She knew her son was finally going to receive the medical attention he required.

Several days after the procedure, Blessing's smile returned. Now he giggles with a complete upper lip, and he can drink from a bottle effectively. Blessing needs to gain more weight before his next surgeries. Next time the medical team sees him he'll be a bigger, stronger boy.

His mother smiled shyly when I commented on how good Blessing looked post-operation. "Yes," she whispered gratefully, "he is a beautiful boy."



Blessing and his mom with ship photographer Debra

Photo by Angie Hess