

# Opening Day at Mother Victoria's Orphanage

May 13, 2006

Opening day for Mother Victoria Thomas' orphanage in Kingsville #7 began with a parade. Children from all three of "Mama Victoria's" homes lined up in brightly colored uniforms, singing and dancing as they marched through Kingsville up the highway and into the village leading to the new, cheerful building they can now call home. Joy filled the atmosphere, laughter on the lips of the children, grins on the faces of the crowd from Kingsville who came out to watch the festivities, some falling into step at the end of the line. Long before the parade began Saturday morning, though, the children were awake and anticipating the day.

"The kids just all got up at 4:30 a.m. and they were just praying and praying for Mercy Ships and for each of us that God would bless us in our lives. It's very, very humbling," said Kimberly Williams, *Anastasis* deck administrator, who spent the night at the orphanage Friday night in preparation for the opening day celebration.

Mercy Ships crew joined the deck department to celebrate what has become an incredible story of God's faithfulness and provision through the deck department's service project. During the Liberia field service, the deck department raised over \$40,000 for the project. The march



kicked off opening ceremonies, celebrating a new school building, a 4300 square foot dormitory, a well, and row of latrines along with other improvements to the property.

The day included speeches, a prayer of dedication, and songs by some of the children.

Mama Victoria marched towards the rear, offering hugs and a gap-toothed smile to all she passed by. She told stories of her years with the orphans as she walked, remembering



Mama Victoria sat facing the crowd as the opening ceremony began. Teachers and caretakers kept a watchful eye on the children, seated behind the Mercy Ships attendees and along the side of the porch. Mercy Ships waterman and project leader Tony Van Alstine, who first prayed for a service opportunity in Liberia, sat front and center, quietly observing, smiling. The porch décor included crayon-drawn, child-scrawled posters proclaiming an assortment of affections including, “Thank you, Tony” and “We love Mercy Ships.” Van Alstine was quick to recognize the group effort in completion of the

how the Red Cross brought her children during Liberia’s fourteen year civil war, when she started taking kids in as a response to seeing their need. Some of the children stayed temporarily, separated from parents during the war but later reunited; others became permanent members of the Thomas family. They were the ones who had no one when the war ended, their mothers and fathers casualties, the children scarred and alone. As the parade ended and attendees were seated in the shade of the new building’s brightly painted porch, she slipped away to change into her Sunday best.

“Can you imagine the children what they must go through? It was not an easy task, with a hunger, fasting and praying in the morning. But God entered in through Mercy Ships, into our compound and he begins to answer. The Lord our God is alive,” Mama Victoria said.



project, celebrating individuals from both the local and Mercy Ships communities.

As speeches wrapped up, Mercy Ships chaplain Ken Payne dedicated the building, praying that Jesus would be the center of life at the orphanage. He encouraged all involved at the orphanage—children, caretakers and teachers,



destroying the old structure...



...and moving into the new one.

and Mama Victoria and her family—to find joy and peace by trusting God to provide for all their needs. As Payne ended his prayer, the ribbon was cut to the new building and to a row of newly dug latrines, and Mercy Ships crew toured the facility. Some of the orphans packed their bags and moved them from the small mud structure that formerly housed them and into the new building, their home. The older boys took sticks and machetes and symbolically tore down the walls of the old structure.

Willy Thomas, Mama Victoria's son, a seminary student and pastor for the orphans, shook crewmembers' hands while laughing with the children. Thomas talked about the need to invest in the orphans. He wants to see them educated. He wants them to have dreams. He's committed to giving them the means to rise above their circumstances. He consistently pointed to Jesus as he discussed the day's events.

"This is an exciting day because it brings us to a place of realizing that we are truly God's children, and that we have come to be here by the (help of) the Mercy Ships crew... We want to give God the praise for this glorious place," Thomas said.

The changes made to Mama Victoria's orphanage illustrate one example of the eleven orphanage or orphanage-related projects that took place during the Liberia field service. Other orphanages received new roofs, beds and supplies, with Bible studies and other activities that allowed crew to love the kids, painting a vibrant picture of what God's love looks like in hundreds of children's lives.

As the day came to a close, crewmembers, caregivers, and children embraced, some crying. The celebration ended with goodbyes in recognition of the ship's nearing departure date. Williams wiped tears from her eyes, her words from earlier in the day a fitting summary to what had taken place.

"Perfect sweetness," she said.



ribbon cutting for the new latrines.