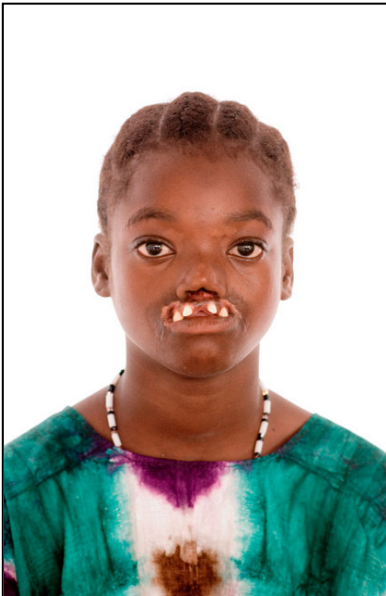


Mary



15 May 2006



Mary was a lot like most kids: playful, cheerful, friendly, carefree. When the 11-year-old came onboard a Mercy Ship, she surprised her doctors and nurses with her positive attitude and zest for life.

It was surprising to them because Mary had, for most of her life, dealt with the effects of noma. Known as “the flesh-eating disease,” noma is a bacterial infection that destroys the tissue of the mouth and face. The World Health Organization estimates that more than 100,000 children contract this preventable disease each year, and more than 70% of them die. Those who survive – like Mary – are sentenced to live with disfigurements that affect their ability to breathe, eat, and speak. Often the survivors become outcasts.

In November 2005, Mary attended a Mercy Ships medical screening day in her hometown of Monrovia, Liberia. She was examined by doctors and scheduled for a series of procedures that would bring her to the hospital ship for more than three months.

Many patients – particularly those who have endured years of being mocked and avoided – carry a great deal of fear with them when they first come onboard. But Mary was different upon her arrival.

“Considering a lot of other kids are very withdrawn at first, she was surprisingly outgoing,” said Judith Anderson, a ward nurse. Mary was courageous and trusting as she approached each of her surgeries.

The surgical team, led by Dr. Gary Parker, planned to create a new lip for Mary, but they ran into an obstacle early on. On an older patient, there are many ways to rebuild an upper lip, but on a young face like Mary’s, the scarring would have been extensive. So the doctors needed another solution.

They decided instead to take skin from her neck, but to do so, they first needed to stretch out the skin there. The usual procedure for stretching skin is to insert a special balloon; but that was ill-advised in this case. Dr. Parker and the medical staff thought through a range of options. They decided their best bet was to use tongue depressors, but those were just a bit too long. So they sent a stack of depressors to the ship’s carpenter, who cut them to the right size, sanded them down, and sent them to be sterilized.

And this was just the beginning.

Spending more than three months onboard made Mary quite a fixture on the Mercy Ship. “She was in charge of the ward,” said nurse Laura Hinde. She made friends, and she looked after all of the patients. And she grew up.



“She looked like a little girl when she first came, and when she went away she looked like a young lady. She really did. With people giving her attention and love, she just blossomed,” Anderson remarked.



Very few patients stay on the Mercy Ship over the Christmas holiday, but Mary and two other young girls needed to remain onboard. Things were quiet in the ward, so Hinde decided to read *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the classic story detailing the Christian life, to them. They talked about how the book applied to their lives, and all three of the girls decided they wanted to follow Jesus.

It made a difference in their lives, too. They’d had a conversation about the importance of being thankful. One day, they surprised Hinde with just how deep that lesson had gone. At one point as they recovered, the three girls had to have special diets, specially modified because of their limitations. The food was none too appetizing. Mary, for instance, could only eat pureed food, through a 50 ml syringe. It wouldn’t have been surprising if they’d all had bad attitudes. But instead, as they prepared to pray over their meal, the girls got their nurse’s attention and said, *“Laura! Look! We thank God for our food!”*

After seven surgeries onboard the Mercy Ship, Mary is now back at home with her family. Thanks to the help of a crewmember onboard the hospital ship, she’s in school, too. And she’ll return for a surgery when another Mercy Ship visits Liberia again.

The changes brought about by these medical procedures have been remarkable, but, as Hinde noted, *“The most important thing we do on the ward is to show God’s love – no amount of operations is going to give them what they need.... They see people who love them and don’t care about how they look. They see that we do genuinely care – and that produces such a change in them.”*



Photos by Debra Bell – Mercy Ships Int’l