



MERCY FLOATS

A 19 Year Old Missionary's Letters Home

ANISHA HOPKINSON

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By Anisha Hopkinson

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To my family: Thank you for modeling a life of love.

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To all 19 year olds: May you be ruined for anything but seeking God's Kingdom, no matter where you are.

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Introduction

Restless in college and threatening to quit school and move into an apartment with my best friend, my Dad introduced me to an organization called Mercy Ships. After just one evening reading about the life changing free surgeries Mercy Ships provides on board their hospital ship in Africa, I was hooked. I had to go.

During my two years on board the M/V Anastasis I wrote many e-mails home to my parents. As a way to share my adventures with friends and family, my parents asked if they could select and print some of my messages. With e-mails from November 2000 to April 2001, my parents created a book called "Anisha's Journal".

Mercy Floats: A 19 Year Old Missionary's Letters Home is a reprint of that original book.

Thank you Mom and Dad for selecting, compiling, printing, sewing bindings, and sharing my letters. I love you.

19 year old me preparing to go to Africa for the first time. I had no idea what lay ahead and am forever changed by my time onboard the Mercy Ship M/V Anastasis.

Nowadays you'll find me with my husband and son serving isolated jungle communities in Papua, Indonesia with Helimission.

I'm still writing, too. Regularly journaling about cross-cultural living, helping people, and loving Jesus on Nama Saya Mommy:

namasayamommy.blogspot.com



Original Bio: 29 April 2001

Anisha (age 19) is the oldest of four children. Her parents are Byron and Brenda Harris and siblings are Brenton (18), Abram (16) and Dean (14).

She was home schooled until grade 10, entered Mayde Creek High School in Katy, Texas and relocated to Downers Grove, Illinois where she graduated from North High School.

Anisha attended the College of DuPage for a year while working part time and volunteering as staff with the Junior High group at the Wheaton Evangelical Free Church.

She felt the call to Africa missions during this time and looked into mission work on the Mercy Ship Anastasis.

With support from her church and private donations from her friends and family she was able to attend Mercy Ships' Discipleship Training School (DTS) in Texas and Guatemala.

After completion, she was accepted as part of the Anastasis crew and assigned to Housekeeping Crew Services. From there she applied for Relief and Development Services in which she is assisting in building the Medical Facility in Agla, Benin - a clinic/dispensary and maternity/birth center.

Her next assignment will be with Reception Services during Mercy Ship's European procurement. Anisha is excited because during some of this time, while the Anastasis is in Spain, she will be able to improve her Spanish as she communicates with Spaniards who visit.

Thanks Anisha for giving us the freedom to put this journal together and edit it without your input. Brave girl!

Te queremos mucho!

Mom and Dad

Sierra Leone to Benin

November 8, 2000

I don't know if you heard anything about the 'touching' we had the other day. When leaving Sierra Leone our ship bumped another. The official press release is posted on the Mercy Ships web-site. Here is some cool stuff you may not read on the web-site:

That morning when we arrived in Sierra Leone, Perry, a chaplain here on board, was hit in the leg (his leg was broken as a result) by a mooring rope that had snapped. That in itself was covered by God because people have been cut in half by those ropes before (not on our ship, mind you). The rest of the day was great. Our deck crew unloaded all the pallets for the New Steps program in under four hours! Averaging 3 minutes per pallet!

The next problem came when we were leaving. We had no tug boats (because the port had been bombed). We were docked in between two ships with shallow water in front of us and a strong current pulling the ship backwards. I was standing on Promenade Deck waving good bye to the people on the dock when the ship started to move. Almost immediately I could feel something was wrong. We were moving way to fast.

I looked back at the ship behind us, "we are going to hit, this is not good" was the only thing running through my mind. And sure enough we did. I stepped back from the railing and watched in awe as our starboard side scrapped along the side of the other ship. The other ship was so huge that it was like I was staring at a wall of metal. Finally it was over and then to my complete awe we started moving forward and were hitting the ship again!

I ran out on Aft Deck to get away from the pieces of metal which were being thrown onto Promenade Deck by the touching. A couple of men from the other ship were standing on their deck staring and waving at us. They were so close if I had reached out my hand I could have touched theirs.

Everyone sort of got together on Aft Deck and we all started to pray. Then we broke up into groups of 3 or 4 and prayed some more. We prayed for the captain to think clearly, for clear communication between the bridge and the engine room, and for unscarred relationships and forgiveness from the ship we hit. Then an amazing thing happened, the whole group broke out in praise! It was so awesome!

That night the captain came over the P.A. and asked forgiveness from the crew. I couldn't help but think, "A leader who is humble enough to ask for forgiveness. That is the kind of man I want to follow."

The next day we had a community meeting. When the captain stood up to address the crew everyone stood and cheered. I was so proud of my captain! Then came the most exciting news yet . . . two of our life boats were damaged enough to render them useless. However, three years ago three life rafts had been donated to us. That is not the kind of thing usually kept in storage on the ship (for space reasons), but for some reason they were still there. This allowed us to continue to sail, all other damage was purely cosmetic and could be fixed by day workers once we reached Benin.

As for the other ship, they decided not to claim any money for the damages they sustained. Want to know something else? The captain of the other ship is Greek, guess what his last name is? . . . Anastasis!

Just wait, there is more . . . after the touching we lost a lot of air in the engines allowing the captain only a couple of more moves. Clem (the captain) said he experienced a radical clarity of thought and was able to get the ship out of port. The engine room also had perfect clarity. Just what we were praying for on aft deck! There are many more things which resulted from that touching in individual crew members lives as well . . . unity, love, and the reality of the power of prayer.

So I know I have spent a lot of time on this subject, but it is something which really has opened my eyes to the fact that God is with us.

Love,

Anisha

November 20, 2000

The ship is good. The day workers have started today and some of the first patients arrived this morning as well. Exciting! The whole atmosphere of the ship changes once the Africans are on board. I love it! I was really excited to find out that many of the people I had met in town and at the local churches are here as day workers. I was wondering how I was going to keep in touch, but now with them on the ship it is much easier. I can have lunch with them and spend break-times with them.

I can't wait till the wedding! I bought an African dress for it. I think we (the others who are going to the wedding - 47 in all from the ship) are going to stay at the YWAM base in Tema, Ghana. I think that'll be great, I hear it is really beautiful there. I really have no idea what to expect. I don't even know how I am going to get to Tema (Benjamin is putting together transportation for us), but hey, I can relax 'cause this is Africa and everything is last minute!

So about the screening, as you know I worked the 'No Station'. About one hour into it, I had to quit calling it the 'No Station' and called it the 'Prayer Station'. That at least helped me bring my focus back to what God could do. With each person who was told no, my heart got heavier and heavier. It was so emotionally and physically draining. There were thousands there and most were told no.

I know that we can't help everybody and if it wasn't for God we could help nobody, but still I find myself discouraged. About mid-day I had had enough. I took a break. I didn't want to hurt for these people anymore. I was tempted to even treat them with coldness to protect my own heart. That means numbing yourself. Not having compassion on them. It means dealing with them as the masses, not as individuals.

After my break I went back to work with a new resolve, I was going to make a point to treat each one as Christ would treat them. After all, long before the screening day had arrived we had been praying that God would only bring those who He had purposes for and all others He would keep away.

What if His purpose for some of them was to be handed a cold cup of water by someone who genuinely cared for them? Or to be hugged and asked about their day? What if some were not there for surgery, but to experience Christ in a brand new way?! With this in my heart I went back to work and the day become increasingly better. It still hurt when I dealt with people who had been turned down, but I think that I wouldn't have been real if it didn't.

So besides the screening, things have been pretty quiet. I might be going on a weekend outreach to Nigeria, but we aren't sure about the dates yet. Only problem is that every country I travel to I must get a visa for and that can be a huge pain.

The outreaches really haven't picked up to full swing yet so I am not too busy at the moment. I was looking at a map and counting all the countries I have been in this year. Do you realize I have been in 8 foreign countries? Wow. That is so amazing to me.

Do you also realize that this month makes it a year since my interest (thanks to you, Dad!) in Mercy Ships began? I applied for a DTS last November. How time flies! And already I have been on the ship for 7 weeks. It doesn't feel like it considering I only spent 8 weeks in Guatemala and that seemed like ages! If you had told me that I would be doing this when I was in high school I would have thought you a fool. Mostly because I wouldn't have thought there was any possible way I could come up with the money for this! I have not held a salaried job since February!

Thinking about this has made me homesick at times. I think about Thanksgiving at Denny's (hee. hee. hee) and Christmas... it makes me laugh because I know that the boys are probably complaining (as I would probably be) about shoveling the driveway and why don't we have a snowplow, everyone else seems to.

I bet you guys are looking forward to when the snow is deep enough to go sledding and are grateful that you won't be raking leaves for a few months. Somebody probably needs new boots and I bet most of the gloves don't have matches. Mom is probably already planning her Christmas party at Arbor Park and I bet everyone is talking about winter break and how long it seems to be taking to get here. It's those little things that I really miss. I regret that I am spending Christmas in hot Africa.

I had better go now, much love and can't wait to hear from you and about everything that is happening in the States. Are Grandma and Grandpa coming for Thanksgiving? What about Uncle Don? I hope so, that would be really nice.

Love,

Anisha

November 27, 2000

I'm back from Ghana. Hey Dad, sorry you couldn't get through on the phone. So Ghana . . . wonderful. Way nicer than Benin. Let me recount the trip:

We left the ship at a little after noon. We had two vans for the lot of us (33 went). That was interesting. It is a 3-3.5 hour drive to Togo. Togo takes about an hour to get through, and then once in Ghana it is another 3 hours till the YWAM base where we were staying. So, you are looking at about an 8 hour trip if you can hit the borders just right. Well, it took us about 12 hours.

The borders were awful - because we are white. It took forever, and I couldn't believe how hot you can get when you are riding smooshed together (on top of each other sometimes) in a car. I was soaked with sweat by the time we reached Ghana. But the transit was so worth it.

Ghana is stunning, so green and the beaches! You could never find beaches that beautiful in America without a giant resort nearby. The beaches were not touristy at all. In fact, they were lined with fishing boats carved out of tree trunks. The boats were huge. Once I looked out into the ocean and a little off shore there was one of these beautiful boats filled with fishermen casting their nets into the water. It was so beautiful. Reminded me of the disciples and what they must have been doing before Jesus called them. Picture what a boat in bible times would look like to you and that was this boat. I got some pictures of it, hope they turn out.

The wedding was also wonderful. Got pictures of that as well. It was just like a church service, but with a wedding in the middle. We worshipped and danced and there was even a message. So cool to see how much they included God into the wedding ceremony. My friend Ernest is from Ghana and so I left the reception early and we went to his house -about 10 minutes from the church- so a few of us could meet his family and friends. When we got back to the church the bus had already gone back to the YWAM base! They left us! We ended up taking a taxi back that night. Oh well.

Today I had to lead department devotions. I had completely forgotten about it until this morning at 7:20 - devos begin at 8. But it turned out ok. Everything else is going great. Hopefully this Wednesday I will start at the 'Sisters of Charity', the home for malnourished children.

My French stinks. I speak better Twi. But Twi is frustrating too. It's tonal, that's what makes it hard. I don't really know why I can't seem to get French, but I can't. I haven't come to the point where I want to give up just yet, but I hate that I can't understand it.

It seems to make no kind of sense. Ahhh! Well, lunch is starting now, got to go.

December 18 , 2000

Hey Padre. Como estas? Today has been a hard day. I walked into the dining room and there were all these families sitting together making Christmas cookies. I almost died. I went back to my cabin and cried myself to sleep. I woke up and went to dinner.

At dinner I sat with the people on my DTS and at the end of dinner I totally broke. Yes, right there in the middle of the dining room with tons of people around I cried my eyes out. I was like, 'Buy my ticket now! I am going home now!' But they all prayed with me and that helped a lot. I will vow this though. Never again will I be away for Christmas. Never! Way to depressing, makes me too homesick.

Well, with that all said, let me finish telling you about the surgery I watched. I think I left off were the doctor had cut open the girl's head and took out a piece of her skull. He carved a piece of bone from the skull and took some of the skin that covered the skull (under the first layer of skin) and filled in the hole in the girl's nose. Then he took the piece of bone he had carved and shaped it into a bridge for her nose. He put the skull piece back on her head and stitched her all back up.

I have never been so amazed in my life! The pleasure of God was in the room as the doctor worked.

Much love,

Anisha

Intro to Life on the Ship: First Newsletter

December 30, 2000

Dear Friends,

Hello! Life here on the ship has been different and challenging. Here is my story...

Everything was a blur. I had only been on board for three days and was still completely jetlagged. I was constantly getting lost as well. Nothing on the ship made any sense and all the corridors and decks looked the same. Frustrated doesn't even begin to describe how I felt. The only redeeming factor of my emotions was the twinge of awe I had retained which was now almost entirely buried under tiredness and confusion.

"Chaplain's Tea" the note had said. Somehow I managed to find the Pacific Conference Room and stumbled in just on time. If it wasn't for the pot of coffee in front of me I surely would have fallen asleep at the 'Anisha' reserved table seating.

"Anisha, why did you come to the Anastasis?" asked the man sitting a little ways from me (later I was to realize he was one of the chaplains on board). I paused for a moment before answering, trying to collect my thoughts. "To get to know God better." I responded.

A funny thing happens to people when they are totally exhausted, they become brutally honest and have an inability to give flowery speeches or to impress. That same blunt honesty had swept over me. The others who attended the tea had thrilling answers for this question. Some had been radically saved and wanted all people to know the freedom they had, others clung to the 'great commission' and spoke of an intense passion for world evangelization. My answer was not so glorious. I even felt a bit pathetic. A few more questions and it was on to the next new recruit. Thirty minutes later we finished the tea. I headed back across the ship and fell into bed.

Four weeks later we sailed into Benin and soon after that the outreach began. We seemed to hit the ground running. My first true introduction to Africa was at the medical screening. The amount of people there was a bit overwhelming. It was hot and I had a terrible time communicating since I don't speak French and translators were few and far between. I was at the 'Prayer Station' surrounded by all of those who had been told they could not be helped. The day proved to be exhausting, both physically and

emotionally. So many people had the look of toil and strain about them. Weariness shown on their faces where the struggles of daily life had left their marks.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

I was glad to be able to lie on my bunk in my air conditioned cabin at the end of that day. Far away and protected from all the problems and needs of the masses.

A couple of weeks after the screening I started going to the 'Missionaries of Charity', home for malnourished children twice a week. Little faces and hands, staring, reaching, clinging to me as I sang, played and talked with them. I still go to this place and it has been amazing to watch the children grow. They already have changed so much.

A little girl there named Delphine has changed the most. When she arrived she was severely malnourished. Now she has gained weight and her skin's elasticity is back. However great the physical change was, the change in Delphine's heart was greater. Delphine was a terror when she first arrived. She hit and bit and tormented the other children as well as the staff. Never had I met a little girl like her. Delphine now greets us at the gate when we arrive. She helps us clean, sits on our laps and snuggles up close. She shows off her school work and is apparently doing quite well with it. The trick? She was presented real love. Instead of being spanked she was scooped up into someone's arms and held close. This was something she never had before.

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." (Luke 18:16)

Every time I leave that place I look forward to when I will go back. Excitedly anticipating the next time I get to kiss the faces of those dear little ones.

Down in the ward on the ship there was a little two year old girl named Maruella. She has a clef lip and has just received repair surgery. The nurses bustled around her checking monitors and tubes as her parents sat at her bed side. Altogether they looked a bit overwhelmed. Through an interpreter I introduced myself to them. This was my first crew to patient interaction. We talked and talked, mostly about the differences between where I am from and where they are from. I learned a lot from Maruella and her parents. I learned what it is like to have hope and joy in trials.

Maruella is long gone now and I wonder if and how this surgery has changed her life, how it has changed her parents' lives, and how knowing her has changed my life. Other patients as well have come and gone and I find myself wondering.

Ward Nurse Kristy Layton put it like this, "In the ward this week, we are learning to close our eyes, hold a hand, and let those hot tears burn our eyes. We are learning. Our teachers are young, fragile, and beautiful, and they raise their hands to the sky. We stare up with them hoping to catch a glimpse of what they see."

Yesterday I thought about my answer to the chaplain's question at the tea and the reason I am here. I am finding out that 'to get to know God' is to lay yourself and your desires down. That is scary.

What if I never went to the screening, never stepped a foot inside the Missionaries of Charity, never once sat with a patient or cried with someone? What if back in the States I had never spent time with a junior high student or drove my friends to church? Each and every time I stepped out of my comfort zone God taught me something, showed Himself a little more.

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." (Matthew 16: 24-15)

I want that.

God bless,

Anisha Harris

A New Year

January 1, 2001

Happy New Year! So how was it? Where were you when the clock struck 12? Beat on a few pots and pans?

I had a blast. A group of us were just hanging out, then we went up to the Scottish dance and stayed there till about 11. Then we went to the beach...yes, I was in the ocean to bring in the New Year. It was so fun. We had a bonfire and the whole bit.

Went to church yesterday. So great. I really didn't want to go, really wanted to sleep in and all, but I dragged myself out of bed and went. We took this little (about 9 years old) girl named Vivian (a patient from the ward) and her father to the church as well. Vivian had two huge tumors, each about the size of a softball, on either side of her neck. She has already had one removed and after some test results come back she is going to have the other removed as well.

Vivian clung to me. She would not let me go! She held my hand when we walked and in the church she rested her head on my lap. At one point the pastor's wife handed me her baby so she could lead worship, forcing Vivian to stop leaning on me. The moment the baby was gone she put her head back in my lap.

The church is about a mile from the ship, and we walk through the market place to get there. The way back was really hard (I guess I just didn't notice it on the way there). Vivian was clinging to me just as tight as ever smiling and the whole bit, then we got to the market. People were staring at her. Every time they would stare I would look at Vivian and smile, draw her close and love on her as much as I could. 'So she has a tumor,' I thought, 'get over it, she is probably the best little girl you'll ever meet.' Vivian walked on smiling and looking happy as ever.

I am visiting her in the ward today if it is allowed. Her Father speaks English so I'll spend time talking to him as well. You want to know something really cruel, Vivian has these tumors, well her father was in a car accident and his left arm and left side of face is really messed up. It is all healed now, but the scarring is awful. He gets stared at, too. Now imagine as they walk together. Father and daughter, pointed at, mocked, and laughed at. Makes me sick to think about it.

Vivian's father (can't remember his name) might be able to have the glass, still there from the accident, taken out of his arm by Mercy Ships. He is really hoping that will happen and so am I.

But there is a happy part of this. Vivian's dad is a Christian, and boy does he love the Lord. You can see it in his face, it just lights up when he talks. That is so awesome! And Vivian as well has this joy about her, always bright, always loving. It amazes me.

Much love,

Anisha

January 3, 2001

Gomer, the guy that heads up Relief and Development Services, has offered me a job, well sort of, more like to try out for a job. He wants me to spend a week out working on the site (construction stuff) to see if I mesh with the other R&DS'ers. Even if I do that doesn't mean the job is mine, there is another person who is being considered for it as well. But who knows, if all else fails at least I will have gotten to spend a week out there. That'll be cool. Much love and hope you get this e-mail.

Relief and Development Services

January 19, 2001

Hey, how's it going? I have fantastic news! I will no longer be working on the ship and struggling to find time to get off for outreach purposes. I just got accepted full time to R&DS! (Relief and Development Services) This past week I was working out at the site as sort of a trial. I loved it. Apparently they liked me too because they offered me a job! I didn't think they would really want me: A) I have like no real experience with construction. B) There was someone else who was trying out for the job and he seemed the type (to me at least) who would be chosen for that kind of work. Score for the little guys!

Gomer, who is my new boss, sat me down today and asked me what I thought of my week on the site. I said I had a blast and would love to have the job. Then I was totally honest and said that the reason I thought I shouldn't have the job was that I was clueless about the work and that would mean someone would have to explain everything to me. But I said I was willing to learn. Then Gomer said that he realized that and also said that Martine (the leader at the site) knew that as well (after all she had been explaining everything to me all week) and that they didn't mind. Gomer said he was confident in his choosing me to work there. I am thrilled.

This is a huge change and it comes with major sacrifice. First it means really long days. We start at 7am and end at 5:30. The job takes so much physical energy that I need tons of sleep to function correctly, no more late nights...that means my social life (currently quite active) will suffer big time.

Also it means I must learn French. I have been getting on well with the very little I know (plus a translator), but now I have to overcome all my frustrations and just learn the language... for the most part my co-workers (20 locals and 3 Mercy Ship people) don't speak English and I currently don't know enough French to get by on the work site. That will be really tough. Also Martine is the only other female on the site. This is particularly hard because the guys here treat women as a lower class...good thing Martine is the boss.

With all this said I am really excited. The physical exhaustion I can deal with. You get tired or frustrated and want to quit but then you look up and see the Beninese children playing near by and you are put face to face with the reality of what you are building. This clinic is awesome for these people. Agla (the town) is very poor and the doctors

and nurses who will use that clinic will save lives. That is exciting. That is so worth the sacrifice.

Next week Pastor Laurence (a Mercy Shipper) is bringing the Jesus video out to Agla...I will try to go with him. Agla is a gold mine for spiritually starved people. Laurence has bible studies which are flourishing and 3 people even got saved on Friday. Laurence does not do mass evangelism, he is their friend. It is so awesome to be able to be out with him and see all that is happening there. So that is my way exciting news, hope your are happy with me!

Anisha

January 22, 2001

Hey, how is everyone? I'm good. Went surfing yesterday. So much fun. I got smashed by the waves, though. They were way too big for me to really surf, but it was a blast being tossed around by them. I got thrown really hard once and got a few bruises from it, but that's ok, I still had a blast.

Yesterday evening (surfing in the morning) I went to visit an outreach team in some village about an hour from the ship. That was great, a few of my good friends are on that team and I haven't really seen them for more than about 5 minutes in 5 weeks. They are doing great, living rough though. They have no running water, so they have to draw their water from the well behind the house. Only the well is drying up so they can't shower. All water is being reserved for drinking, cooking and washing dishes. They are praying for rain.

They don't really have electricity. I say 'don't really' because the current is so weak that it only powers one little light (but that is only some of the time) and one fan. Thank God they have that fan!

The house is nice, but kids from the village are constantly coming over. They had to make a rule that nobody is allowed past the front porch unless they are invited to come in. Sound like a basic rule? Well, when they didn't have that rule people would just walk right in and sit down in their living room.

Now, I know that our culture and the African culture are very different, but what would you do if you were working or planning your week and some random person, whose language you barely speak, just came into your house and sat down?

But all in all they are doing quite well. I am really looking forward to starting R&D (Relief and Development) this week. I feel like I am just kinda sitting on my hands right now. Oh, I have to go, the ship shop is now open and I need to pick up a few things (big craving for orange juice).

Much love,

Anisha

January 25, 2001

Hey family, today has been a good day. Nothing new or exciting, but all the same a good day. Yesterday was the screening. I didn't go because I had been on watch the night before and so I slept all day.

Anyway, at the Prayer Station the last DTS was praying for people and three (one right after the other) got healed. They had cataracts. The cataracts started to shrink until gone. The DTS team even gave them vision tests. They have their sight. One man was jumping around, dancing and screaming, 'I can see! I can see!' God is so amazing, huh? I don't know all the details, but am expecting to hear everything tonight at community meeting and will write you then with a 'full report'.

So here are the places and dates we will be (somewhat tentative) sailing...

Place:	Arrive:	Depart:
Benin	November 8, 2000	May 30, 2001
Tenerife	June 7	June 18
Shipyard, Cadiz, Spain	June 21	August 9
Malaga, Spain	August 10	August 13
Guernsey, UK	August 17	August 20
Edinburgh, Scotland	August 22	August 28
Bremen, Germany	August 30	September 11
Kristiansand, Norway	September 12	September 24
London, England	September 26	October 3
Rotterdam, Netherlands	October 4	October 23
Tenerife	October 29	November 7
Freetown, Sierra Leone	November 12	March 11, 2002
Banjul, The Gambia	March 13	June 20
Tenerife	June 24	July 4

So, there it is...exciting huh! 8 more countries. So cool. Gotta go. Much love,

Anisha

Hard Days and Big Blessings

January 30, 2001

Hey, how are ya? Yesterday was a hard day at work. First, it took forever to pour the molds to support the roof and so we worked straight from 8am till 2pm when we were finally able to have lunch. Also, a group of guys were lifting up steel beams (very, very heavy) and they dropped them on a guy's foot. So another guy rushes over to help and they get the first guy out and then drop it on the second guy's foot. The first one ended up being taken to the emergency room. He broke his big toe and cut it up badly. Turns out he had broken it twice before and it had never healed properly, so now it's a big mess.

The second guy just got really bruised up, he'll be hurting for a while. Then another guy got really sick and had to be taken home and still another got cement in his eye, ouch. To top it all off, the truck which we use to load all the welding stuff onto, well the brakes aren't working. So we had to put everything in the land rover and by that time there was only enough room left for the driver and the cooks. The rest of us sat at the site and waited for the land rover to come back. Finally, it did come back and we were all able to go home. Long day.

Today is going to be long as well, but not for the same reasons as yesterday - I hope. We are pouring in the cement slab for the floor of the first building. We can't realistically start till 2pm which means it'll take us till about 6pm to finish. I'm not complaining, believe me, I love being out there, and this is really exciting because now it'll really feel like we are coming close to the end of the project (at least on the first building).

The ship's air conditioning is still off. So hot in here. Seriously it is hotter on the ship than off. It's because there isn't any breeze on the ship. Hopefully this will be fixed before April or May, that's when it gets super hot here. Right now I guess it's winter...sort of.

Well, I have to go to breakfast now.

Much love,

Anisha

February 2, 2001

Hey. I am so exhausted, but happy. Very happy. The floor is completely poured in the first building and we are ready to put in the trusses (stuff that supports the roof). But this makes me a little nervous. Last week two people got hurt moving trusses. On Monday there will be loads of people (including myself) who have never put up trusses. One weighs more than 200 kilos, we are moving 5.

Last year in the Gambia there was an accident (doing what we are doing on Monday) and someone was nearly killed. They let the rope slack and the truss fell 9 feet, missing their face by about a foot. Scary. Now, all this stuff simply happens because people let their guard down, no other reason. If everyone is always paying attention, nobody gets hurt. I am really praying that everybody is awake and sharp next Monday, leaving no room for accidents.

So besides that, I am well. This week was absolutely crazy. We left early and got home late nearly everyday. I was even out at the site again today, even though we don't work out there on Fridays.

Yesterday I taught some of the day workers how to paint...that was fun. They had never held a paint brush before in their life. It was really challenging considering we don't speak each other's language. I had to show them everything, even tell them things like, stay over the tarp, or hold your paint tray with both hands. Regardless of how many times I corrected them they still stepped in paint, spilled paint, and splattered it. I wonder if the tarp even helped. And it took forever, they missed spots and then I would show them, they would go back over it and miss it again.

Finally, I just resolved to going behind them painting what they missed. At the end, one of the day workers told me he liked working with me, because I am a hard worker. That really meant a lot to me. He was pleased with me, a 19 year old white girl who doesn't speak enough French to save her life. I felt really good after that. Respect from the day workers is something I have had to fight for. Believe me it doesn't come easy, it is in direct conflict to their culture.

This week, no matter how crazy, has been awesome. Tons went wrong and there was plenty of room for frustration and bad attitude to take over. For instance, yesterday the truck got stuck on the way home from Agla. It took forever to get it out of the sand and then there was the risk of getting it stuck again.

The truck hit a dip, and I could see before we even stopped that we would be stuck. Collin (driver) gave me and Wiggo the nod to get out and push.

We hopped out and no sooner had my feet hit the ground than about 20 village kids came running to the truck, they helped us push the truck out. They got more in the way than actually helped, but no matter. It was so cool. The truck was free and Wiggo and I jumped back in. The kids crowded the truck and touched us and talked to us, we all said goodbye and as we drove away I could hear the fainting rhymes the children were singing. I was filled with joy and couldn't help but laugh. This whole week has been like that. I have not gotten down or frustrated at all. I don't think I could even if I wanted to.

To be totally honest, I have really been struggling with depression for the last three months. Being here was really hard, especially since I was stuck on the ship and hardly ever got off. Plus I was doing such menial work, not challenging at all. Then all the friends I had made left. Christmas came and I missed home and was really depressed. It was super hard. But this whole week I have had 'joy unspeakable' as they say. I wouldn't trade where I am right now for the world, I love it.

I can't ever remember being so happy, despite how hard things get. It is wonderful. My body can be so exhausted, I can hurt every time I move, but I still find myself ready and willing to work. It is like the hurt and hard work don't really matter, because I am totally satisfied. It is really cool.

Last night at community meeting the speaker's topic was exactly what I have been living through. It was about the hardships we go through, the testing of character, when God puts us in situations to see if we are really worthy of our calling.

Moses for instance, never got into the promise land - not worthy. Abraham on the other hand was found worthy only after he had nearly sacrificed his only son because God told him to. Joseph was the prime example though. He lived through so much. Betrayed by his brothers, stuck in prison, wrongly accused by Potifer's wife. He went through hell before he got to be the 'vice president' of Egypt.

Ever thought about why he had to go through all that? I think (speaker said it) it was because God wanted to see if Joseph was really worthy of what God was calling him to

do. Now I know I am no Joseph, but I wonder if God stuck me on the ship in housekeeping, doing the work nobody else wanted, and being frustrated, and lonely every day, just to see if I was really worthy of what he wanted me to do.

Kinda that, "faithful in little things, God gives you bigger things" concept. I am very aware that I don't really deserve to be where I am. It is such a huge gift and I marvel over it everyday. The speaker also said that there is no shortcut to God's plan for your life, you have to live through everything, a kind of training ground. I think I agree. Let's face it, no way would I have the respect and love for the people who do the unwanted jobs on the ship if I had not had to humble myself and serve in the way they do.

My 15 minutes is up, I have to go to dinner. I love you tons.

February 11, 2001

Hoy, voy a la playa para surfing. Well, I am going with people who are surfing. No puedo surf. I am hopeless. I will body-board. That I can do. We are leaving in two hours (it is 8:20am now) and are going to stay there all day. Come home around 5 or 6, shower and then go out to the Ti- restaurant. Yummm.

Ben (friend) is going to teach me to drive stick. Yikes. But I have to learn because work will require me to drive.

Tengo que ir. Me amo te mucho.

Anisha (no puedo spell!)

February 18, 2001

Hola padres, que tal? Estoy bien pero muy cansada. Deseo dormir. No puedo. Estoy preocupada con nada specific. My mind is just racing. Este semana no trabajo. Vacacion! David Vargas (from Guatemala) escribe me un postcard! que bueno huh! Tengo que escribir a el, pronto.

La Madre de mi amigo Ben esta aqui en Benin. Hoy, ella va a Nigeria, no se porque. Hey, la madre de Ben se puede visitar Africa, TU puedes tambien...con mi padre, y hermanos... ok, so I'm dreamen' :)

So, Dean fue a la school dance? Con Qien??? Y una fiesta despues! No! Dean es mi baby brother, no me gusta, no me gusta. Don't make me go over there and beat you up Dean! Tienes divertido? Que paso?

La semana pasado, 2 day workers y yo pintar (to paint, past tense???) mas trusses. Ellos, (los day workers) no pueden pintar. I was enojada. The paint was everywhere, I went off on them in English, good thing they don't understand. I felt like Ricky from 'I Love Lucy'. Then I told Martine (la patron) y ella grita a ellos en French, they got it in 2 languages! Then things improved. Hey, como estan mis abuelos (Ani y Al)?

ok, me voy. me amo te mucho.

Anisha

March 10, 2001

On a way exciting note, God has proved He really is way bigger than me...once again. I have felt compelled, since being here, to give a lot of money away. Every time I think, *no, that it's just my emotions not really God asking me to give*, I hear this little voice say, "Freely I gave to you, freely give!" So I do it.

Well, that was all fine and easy when I first got here, but to keep up that giving has been a struggle as I watched more money leave my account than arrive. All my crew fees are paid up until June, although June is coming fast. I was worried because I thought, what am I going to do after June if I have no money? How will I pay my crew fees? I really don't spend anything on me, just the necessities, shampoo, toothpaste, and the like. So to watch my account dwindle and know it was because I was giving, kinda scared me.

I couldn't blame anyone but God. The funds reached a little less than enough to pay for two months of crew fees. Then I got really scared...what about taxes? The amount I still had was looking like it would be exactly what I needed to pay the IRS this year. Even scarier, now I didn't have money for after June. Then came another opportunity to give. El Salvador has been suffering with major earthquakes and the whole country is devastated. So again, I gave.

Even less money. Then came satan, "What kind of a missionary are you? You should have kept your money from the beginning. You can't even pay your crew fees now. You are going to be kicked off the ship because you don't have the money..." and on and on it went. Over the past 6 months I have seen God add to my account in amazing ways. Always there seems to be what is needed, I don't know why I doubt. So today I went down to the ship's "atm" to check on the finance situation. More than \$700 arrived. \$200 from an anonymous giver! I wanted to cry. I can just hear God whisper, "Freely I give..." So you see, He really is bigger than me. And boy oh boy am I glad!

Here is the latest from work in Agla. There are about 25 day workers who work with us. Several have asked me to marry them and take them to America with me. The first time this happened I was so shocked I just said "no!" and stormed off...

Yesterday Justin (a co-worker) asked me if I could hook him up with a job in the States. I said, "How could I do that if I live on the ship?" Then he started talking about all the great things that would happen to him if he could go to the States and find work. Obviously he hasn't been to the States and doesn't know anyone -other than me, and I'm white so I don't count- who has been. He told me all about how his American boss would love him and pay him well and he could have money.

Now, don't get me wrong, I understand his frustrations. There really is no work for him here. Life is tough and there is a huge struggle just for the basics. But I really don't believe that taking him from absolute poverty and dumping him into overwhelming wealth will do him any good. So then we talked all about saving money and how to improve the quality of life here in his nation. Besides all that we talked about the fact that he is married and what in the world would his wife do if he left her here and went off overseas? I don't know, but I think he completely missed my point. He still wants to go to America. Too bad he would be really disappointed once he got there.

I know this is really long, hope I wasn't too boring. I gotta go, feel a bit sick. Miss ya, love ya.

Anisha

Language Learning

March 22, 2001

First off, French is frustrating me more than ever. I am learning from the day workers. Good and bad. Good...builds relationships. Bad...they speak some weird mix of French/Fon and I have a really hard time figuring out which language they are speaking. Since they speak French with a Fon accent that makes it even harder to figure out. Yuck. So in my effort to finally learn this language I have taken to having kids teach me. This is so cool.

Across the street from the building site there are these huge cement slabs. Like 50 meters long by 40 meters wide. Huge. I am not really sure what they are for.

Anyway, I took the bucket of sidewalk chalk Mom sent me for Christmas and during my lunch break I went over to the slab and started to draw. It was a matter of minutes before I was surrounded with about 10 kids. We drew for a minute or two and then I got my bright idea. I wrote my name on the ground, said, "Anisha" and pointed to myself. All the kids smiled and grabbed chalk, scribbling out their names as well. And so we went around introducing ourselves.

Then I traced my hand on the ground, pointed to it, and said, "hand" and I wrote the English word below it. Then I traced my other hand and under both I wrote, "hands" then gave the chalk to a kid. It took about 10 seconds for him to figure out what I wanted. He bent down and wrote the French words next to my English ones. After that the whole group of kids (which was growing by the second) started to participate.

I drew a picture, wrote the English word, and they wrote the French word. It was great we did everything from dishes to fish and snails. Basically anything I could draw.

Somewhere along the lines my friend Claire came over. I wrote, "Claire" on the ground with an arrow pointing to her. The kids got the idea and all shouted her name. Claire smiled, and so she was accepted into our group.

Then I got another great idea. Teach them to play tic tack toe. So Claire and I bent down and started to play. They caught on and we had a huge Tic Tac Toe tournament. Soon the hour was over and I had to go back to work, but not before there were nearly 40 kids and adults gathered around. I had a blast.

One of the kids ran home and when he came back he had a pen and a piece of paper. Then he stood over all our drawings and wrote the English words down! I couldn't believe it, this 10 year old wanted to learn English! It cracked me up.

Today I went back to the cement slab during lunch. All our drawings were still there. As soon as I was standing over all the art work I could hear the children coming. I smiled and walked over to a grassy area. I started to collect small stones. Bright idea number two.

The kids watched from a distance. It took a little while. I didn't have bright colored chalk today so they weren't immediately drawn over. Finally I looked up and saw one little boy standing over me. I looked at him and then back at the rocks. I continued to pick up small stones. The boy said something and started to laugh. I sat up. This kid was tiny. Sitting, we nearly saw eye to eye.

I picked some rocks off of my pile and put them on the back of my hand. Then I flicked my hand up, tossing the rocks in the air, turned my hand over and caught as many as I could. Then I showed the kid the rocks in my hand, counted them aloud in English and said, "Four."

The boy smiled and repeated my English. Then he picked up some rocks and repeated what I had just done. He caught 2 rocks. He showed them to me and proudly said, "Four." I laughed and said, "No. Two." He had no idea what I was talking about, but he liked the game so we played it. A few minutes later a few more kids had gathered and they understood that I wanted them to tell me French numbers.

We played the game for a while and soon enough I could count to 12. Then I reached into my back pocket and pulled out a piece of white cement. We wrote down all sorts of numbers and said them in French and English. I was soon interrupted when I heard someone calling me from the building site. I said goodbye and headed back to work.

This has accomplished two things. One, it is such a fun way to learn French. Two, the people in Agla are starting to treat me like a person, not like some white girl who comes to work on a building and then goes home. Granted this has it's frustrations. I am constantly asked for stuff.

They point to my necklace or watch and say, "Gift?" in French. I point to their jewelry or shoes and say, "Gift?" right back. They are a bit insulted, but I think they get the point. It isn't fun to be treated as if you are rich and are into giving handouts. Or, as if I owe them something because I'm white.

I decided not to bring anything over that they couldn't pick up off the ground to play with themselves. I will spend a lot of time just playing with them until I feel confident they understand that I am not going to just give stuff out. Plus I don't want to be mobbed. Also, I have noticed a turning point in people's attitudes.

There is this little boy named Daniel. He is the son of one of the workers and has always been afraid of me. Today we sang made up songs together. There also is this old man, he's like 80, who comes to the site everyday and watches us work. He never even smiles at me, even though I greet him and smile at him everyday. Today for the first time, he greeted me with enthusiasm. It caught me so off guard that I hardly could respond.

I had started to pray that God would give me a way into the lives of the people in Agla. I feel like such a stranger and even unwanted at times. I started to pray for Agla and for the people there.

Yesterday God taught me something. I stood up and watched all the kids playing Tic Tac Toe and God answered what I had been praying. The way they caught the game and played it with me, then began playing it among themselves is how revival will come in Agla. It will come by sharing the gospel and before you know it they are sharing among themselves and it is spreading without my involvement at all. That is what God is doing in their hearts.

As I am praying and sharing out in Agla somebody's heart will be captured by God's love and then they share. It is amazing. It is going to happen. Agla is so for Jesus. I know it and am excited to be a part of it. So I know that this has been a really, really, really long e-mail, I had better go.

Love ya all so much,

Anisha

March 31, 2001

Hey guys. This has been a good week. All of a sudden I got bombarded with e-mails from people I haven't written or talked to since I left Wheaton. Really nice surprises.

Work is nice. On Wednesday and Thursday this week I didn't go out to the site. Instead, Mattias and I built cabinets for the lab in the clinic. I guess I was really missed because all the day workers had asked about me and were getting all concerned. Truth be told, I missed all of them desperately.

I was down in the wood shop thinking all about what they were doing. Who was working in my section...what jokes they were telling...I was being all sentimental and in the end decided to stay at the site as much as I could. No more half weeks in the carpentry shop, it made me miss my friends in Agla. So I guess that is it, huh? When you really know that you have grown to love a place and the people there.

Agla is hard. I thought for sure that working on the ship for a couple of days would be a much needed break. Nope. My mind didn't leave Agla the whole time. Even though it is Saturday, I am looking forward to work on Monday.

In the first week of April I am going to Ghana for fire fighter training. Cool, huh? I will be on the fire team. They asked me to. You know, because I am so brilliant and can think under pressure...or maybe, I was one of the ones they wouldn't be to concerned with if I was lost in the fire, me and my unskilled self!

There is a chance I might do the life boat training there as well ("there" is a maritime college). I was like, "Heck yeah! I'd love to go!" The ship is paying for everything, the travel fares, my visa, food, shelter, school cost, even giving me some extra spending money. Nice huh?

Love ya,

Anisha

p.s. Brenton and Dean you guys are total stinkers, write me!

April 1, 2001

So this e-mail is for Cavilla*, a patient down on the ward. There were 3 or 4 public announcements made today asking for serious prayer. I think Cavilla hit her head and it has caused major swelling of the brain. Her life is very much on the line. She was taken back into surgery and that hasn't stopped the pressure. They sent a few people to her village in search of her dad and a couple other relatives.

Her mom, Rachel, is with her on the ship and very, very scared. Cavilla came out of surgery about an hour ago and is in critical condition. The surgery hasn't solved the problem and the doctors don't know what to do. Please pray for God to work His stuff on Cavilla. She will die, and probably soon, without God's healing.

The captain just made an announcement urging the crew to continue to pray for Cavilla. I passed by the ward earlier and the medical staff looked exhausted and discouraged. It made me cry.

If Cavilla dies will that ruin everything for her village? When patients ask why they are being helped by Mercy Ships, the answer is always, "Because God loves you." How will that answer hold if she dies? I know in my heart that God's love doesn't sway, but does Cavilla's family and friends know that? What if God heals her? Will revival break out? What if he doesn't? Will revival still come? Will hearts be turned to Him or hardened? Here we are all praying and trusting God for a miracle. Please do the same.

**Cavilla, a toddler, had chemotherapy and surgery to remove a large tumor. She was recovering well when on April 1st she lost consciousness and her heart stopped. She died April 2nd. This is the first death on the ship in nearly 3 years. The ship's medical staff attended the funeral. The family and villagers encouraged the staff to continue their work as they saw the love and the sadness the crew shared with the family. Cavilla's story is included in the section "Remember the Stories" at the end of this book.*

A Changed Heart: Second Newsletter

April 13, 2001

Dear friends,

How's life? Mine is not so bad. Sometimes wonderful, sometimes completely frustrating, but that is life isn't it? Usually it is in the completely frustrating times when I learn the most valuable lessons.

For instance, while working in housekeeping I was put face to face with how prideful I am. When finances are low I doubt God's provision even though He has always provided. In Guatemala, I learned that God's plans for my life *really are* good. It is in these times when the truths of my character are put side by side with the truths of God's character and I am forced to take a deeper look and reconsider my heart motives. Most of the time I am not nearly as spiritual as I think I am.

Very recently I had the opportunity to once again look inside and be challenged by the heart of God.

Here's my story:

It's Wednesday morning, we are a week behind schedule on the building project. Everybody is on a bit of an edge and we will probably have to work another day this week if we can't pick up the pace. I am busy inside the first building, a clinic, with Boniface. The two of us are putting together the molds for the concrete base of the walls. We are struggling. One of the boards is a centimeter off and so nothing is square. On top of it all Boniface has a huge crush on me and is asking again, for what seems like the hundredth time, if I want to marry him.

"No!" I shout back at him. Everything begins to unravel, "I don't even like you. You have no clue what you are doing and all this would go faster if you weren't here. You are the reason nothing is going right!" I continue on in rapid English, cursing Boniface and reducing his worth to very little if anything at all.

Suddenly I felt as if I had been slapped. I certainly would have deserved it. I held my tongue. Then came the gentle, but stern correction, "Boniface is worth more to me than this clinic" the Holy Spirit said. I felt sick to my stomach and for the first time I was very glad that Boniface and I speak different languages.

I went back to working on the boards. I was still angry and frustrated. I could hardly look at Boniface. Every time I did my anger was forced to take a backseat and God's love for this man surfaced in my heart.

This unnerved me. I would have rather sulked in my anger and regretted that I had to put up with workers like Boniface. I would have rather dwelt on my idea that he was actually a hindrance to this "good work". Left up to me, I would have, but thankfully God didn't leave it up to me and He pressed in with His love and compassion for the individual.

I have, since this episode, made a commitment to be nice to the day workers. And since my commitment, I have made good friends. Boniface still asks me often to marry him, so do a few of the others for that matter, and I still say no. On the other hand there are those like Papa Foster, who has invited me to have lunch at his house on Monday. Also there is Rene, his wife, and two-year-old son who have become my friends. They proudly introduce me to the people in their village and we pray and talk about Jesus and life together. They have strengthened my relationship with God.

Today all of days workers came to the ship. We introduced them at community devotions this morning. They sang a song and I clapped and cheered loudly at the end. I was gushing with pride.

We took the day workers on a tour around the ship and as we met some of the crew along the way I proudly introduced them. They are my co-workers, my friends, and my brothers in Christ. My life is richer because I have known them. I wouldn't trade them for the world.

Much love and God bless,

Anisha Harris



Top: Agla clinic site cleared November 2000



Left: Project Architect Martine
Right: Chris and Luis pour cement floors



Top: Site readied for cement floors.
Bottom: R&DS Manager Gomer oversees
trusses going up February 2001





Top: Morning devotions at the work site
Bottom: George plastering drywall





Top: Team inside installing the ceilings
Bottom: Clinic on the verge of completion



Winding Down in Benin

April 16, 2001

Over the weekend I went out to Agla (the village where I work) with some of my friends from the ship. I took them to visit one of the families I work with. We surprised them by bringing along loads of coke, lolly-pops for the kids, a couple of quilts, rice and so on. Rene and his family were thrilled. My friends that I took along (Ben and Christy, my two best friends on board) loved it. We were invited back, Rene wants to make us some "real African food".

Not too much out of the ordinary has been happening. The clinic is nearly finished and we will hold the opening ceremony on May 18th. Crazy to think it is coming so soon.

Last night, my friends (recently engaged, I might add) Paul and Beth, made a huge apple pie. Oh it was great. There were about 10 of us there to eat it. I loved it.

Yesterday, Christy and I were sitting out on deck reading and watching the ships come in and out of the port. suddenly it got really cold (ok, not cold like you know cold, cold like Africa cold, like maybe 80 degrees) I looked out and just at the horizon the sky and water were black. Christy and I put down the book and watched this amazing storm come in.

We went onto promenade deck (has a roof) and sat there for ages. Everything outside turned black and the sea outside of the port was really rough. The waves were hitting the breakers and coming over them, really huge. The ships that were waiting to get into the port were bouncing around like crazy. A little Benin navy boat went out to rescue some of the small fishing boats and I was sure it would topple.

The storm only lasted about 20 minutes before it was past us, but it was incredible.

Love,

Anisha

April 20, 2001

There are only 4 more weeks till this outreach ends. We dedicate the clinic on May 18th. So Gomer, my boss, has been pressuring me to find a job on the ship while we are in Europe. Today I finally got one. I am really excited.

I had thought that I would end up in the galley or dining room. Instead, I will get to work in Reception. Cool because then I can use my Spanish tons when we are in Spain. I am super pumped.

I also put in a word about taking a vacation over Christmas this year. Sounds like that will work out nicely, although I'm not sure how it will affect my involvement in the Sierra Leone outreach. Love ya!

Anisha

April 21, 2001

Tonight the youth group and I will baby sit all the ship kids. We have been doing 'outreach to the crew' and this week we decided to let parents have a much needed night out away from their kids, this should prove really interesting.

Here is something that you guys could pray for. There are a total of 3 RDS projects happening right now. The building of the clinic in Agla, a training center for orphan boys in Vakon, and the water and sanitation teachings which travel to different villages. Vakon was set up the last time the ship was in Benin and it flopped after we left. So this time, Eddie set out to see it set back on its feet and running independently from the ship. We, at the clinic, thought that it would be cool to help the center by purchasing all the doors we would need from them.

The few doors made were poorly made and not completely finished. This literally stopped the work on the first building. Since we couldn't fit the doors we couldn't build the frames, finish the plastering, start the tiles, and paint...you get the picture. The doors were very poor quality. But, God was good in it, a guy we have been working with a lot and has thus far proved very honest and a great Christian saw the welding program and wanted to get involved. He is an excellent welder. Plus, Anne Gloag, the lady who bought the Africa Mercy ship, also saw the program and wrote out a check to support this guy till the end of the year. Nice, huh.

Also a couple on the ship have decided to stay here in Benin to run the Center after the ship leaves. They are awesome people who have proved to have character.

It isn't all bad. Discouraging, but you can still see God in it. I (and definitely the rest of my dept) would really appreciate it if you could pray for all this to work out. And pray for Eddie.

So that is it. I am all out of exciting things to write, good thing too, this e-mail is already way long.

Love you much

Anisha

April 23, 2001

There is a man here in Agla, his name is Rene, who I am going to help. Let me give you a little background. There is such an attitude of poverty here. Scratch that, spirit of poverty here. Everybody grabs at everything and there is rampant theft, even among Christians (even at the work site). It is very hard to find people who are honest and prefer others over themselves. It is, in a phrase, very discouraging.

Rene and his family have been the ONLY people I have met that have not tried to take advantage of me in some way. I have met a lot of people. Over the last 4 months I've spent nearly every day with Rene, certainly every working day, and some weekends as well.

I was impressed by his passion for God. You should hear this man lead worship, it is awesome and he doesn't even have a band. Then I began to find out even more about Rene. He is an elder in his church and his wife is the worship leader, but even beyond that he is the lead man in church planting.

His church does an evangelistic outreach with the Christians in a near by village. From these outreaches, Rene and his church organize small groups with the existing Christians and the new Christians of whatever village they are in. Rene is the link between the starting group and this church. He sort of helps them get on their feet. These small groups have grown into churches under Rene's watch, but there is a huge lack of material like bibles, discipleship resources, tracts, and on and on. These are things I would like to help him and his church get.

Rene makes less than \$12 a week when he has work. \$100 would go a very long way here in Benin. It would buy about 80 bibles. A little more than a dollar a bible is not much for us in the States, but when you consider the income here and what these people have to support families with, then \$1.50 becomes a lot of money.

On Saturday I am going to Rene's house to meet with some of the people who praying for him and his church planting. I will write my next newsletter about him and what God is doing through his family in Benin. I am going to help buy some bibles and materials. This is important and I believe worth it.

Remember the Stories

The following stories of the Benin Outreach and three patients onboard the M/V Anastasis, Cavilla, Brigitte, and Angelle, were written by Kristy Layton and Kevin Yangas and are shared with great appreciation for their permission to include the stories in this book.

Benin Outreach 2000-2001

The 'before' and 'after' pictures of our patients are incredible. It's good to remember that they only capture a chapter in their lives. For most of our patients their journey and trials are but stories that I cannot fully understand. We hear words like: scorned, outcast, rejected abandoned, but they ring hollow against my memories of the horrible pimple I endured on the day of the big dance. Many have suffered beyond what we can grasp and their suffering does not end when they come to the ship. We can dull the pain of surgery with anesthesia but the healing process takes time and is often difficult and painful. For some the healing process comes complete with days of uncontrollable drooling, swelling that can last for months, infections, injections, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

The ward can be a difficult place. Many people don't like hospitals and it's easy to see why - people suffer there. But what touches me is that some of you still venture down those steps, willingly and with hearts of compassion. I have seen the difference you make. For me it helps me to answer the question "do we make a difference?" The world would judge our efforts by our results, but I think God judges us by our response. I believe Mother Teresa captured it best when she said, "It is not how much you do that matters, but how much love you put into what you do". Many in the world think the problems in Africa are too great.

They don't think they can make a difference so they become indifferent. Indifference is the true enemy of love. Jesus said that the poor will always be with you so I don't think he has called us to solve that problem, he has called us to respond to it. He has asked us to bring hope where there is no hope, to bring light where there is only darkness.

We all know the impact that Jesus has had on the world and history, but the Jews of his day considered him a failure. They wanted a messiah that was going to make a difference and lead Israel out of bondage and into greatness. They saw him as a

failure, but God was well pleased with him. So let's not get stuck judging our outcomes. Let's stay focused on our response and leave the rest in God's hands.

I would like to share with you three different success stories that reflect the same response yet have 3 very different outcomes.

If you had been in the ward at all during this outreach, chances are you would have met Cavilla, Brigitte, or Angelle. If you had read a weekly report from the ward this outreach, chances are you would have read their stories. And if you have known their stories, chances are your life has been changed.

Cavilla

Cavilla came from a village out past Porto Novo called Avagbodji (Ava-BAH-jee). Captain Clem and Sonja Frishknecht met the 2 year old and her mother just after Christmas, while they were exploring outreach possibilities in the area. Cavilla's head was wrapped in a make-shift bandage. Unwrapping the cloth, Sonja discovered a foul-smelling, orange-sized tumor protruding from her right eye. Her mother, Rachel, decided to trust Sonja's offer to help, despite her family's urging that she "just leave her (Cavilla) in a corner to die..." so she could concentrate on her fourth child, due in a couple of months.

During the months that followed, Cavilla's tumor shrank to nearly nothing in response to chemotherapy. We also fell in love with her.

Cavilla had an incredible stubborn streak in her. She realized early on that these yovos cause her pain, and nothing could convince her that sticking needles in her wasn't our primary intention. We tried everything we could think of to win her affection, but she remained cold. She would avert eye contact by looking past us, and she responded to any attempt to touch her by shrugging the body part in closest proximity to the yovo. But over the months, she began to soften. She loved to watch the Jesus film in her language, and my favorite image of her is with her hands in bowls of yam-and-sauce, with the giant bandage over her eye, peering up at the TV screen. She began to let us smile at her, and, on rare occasion, hold her.

Everything with her treatment appeared to be going well. By mid-March, Cavilla was healing, and it appeared that she might be one of the incredible success stories of the outreach. Her "before-after" photos were stunning. We wholeheartedly believed that she was being healed. Her mother gave birth to a son, and named him Camirou. Groups of nurses drove her back and forth to Avagbodoji (Ava-BAH-jee) between treatments, and began to build a relationship with the people in her village.

After three rounds of chemo, Cavilla had surgery to remove the remainder of the tumor and cover the defect with skin and muscle. After the surgery, Crosstide joined the medical staff to share in Cavilla's homecoming. They used the testimony of Cavilla's healing, along with music and drama, to explain the story of Christ. A few days later, the risk of infection and graft breakdown was too great to leave Cavilla in Avagbodji, and she came back to the ship.

Inexplicably a few days later, Cavilla began to have neurological problems: vomiting, slurred speech, seizures and periods of unconsciousness. The medical team spent all day trying to determine the cause, but she slid deeper toward the irreversible. The crew was periodically updated on her progress, and prayer was requested. We tried to wrap

our minds around the idea that our beautiful little friend would likely not make it through the night. Several hours later, efforts to resuscitate Cavilla ceased, and we grieved.

Our "stunning success story" had failed.

Yet on the day of her death, just before her burial, Cavilla's father and village elders requested that we continue to visit them. They wanted to know more about the Jesus that Cavilla and her mother had found. Moved by the care he had seen for his daughter, Cavilla's father Raimy urged his friends to consider the God of Christianity. "She was not their daughter, but they loved her" he said. "While you all turned your back on her, they spent money on her. She has become their daughter because of this".

That same week, a team of crew members brought the Jesus Film to the village. Hundreds of people gathered to watch this film that Cavilla loved so much. At her funeral, a week after her death, Danny Welch explained what being a Christian is about. Bibles were requested, and given to those who could read. Even now, teams visit the village once or twice every week. Health problems in the village are addressed, Bible studies continue. Cavilla's family and others from the village have twice visited the ship for dinner allowing them to see the ship in person, and find answers to their questions about Jesus.

We still don't know exactly why Cavilla died. It is possible that her tumor crept up the optic nerve and began growing behind the bone, into her brain. Or she may have had some undetected complications from her chemotherapy, or possibly cerebral malaria or meningitis. The tumor she had would have killed her in a matter of weeks, had we not started treatment. She would have died on the mud floor of her hut, surrounded by flies and ostracized by her village.

It is the harshest kind of reality that children die every day in Africa. Even here in Cotonou, within a mile or two from where we sleep at night, and most of the time, the cause is much less complicated than Cavilla's.

She died, despite all of our efforts. The success of Cavilla was not in her dramatic recovery, or even her survival. Cavilla's miracle was simply that we knew her. We knew her and loved her in her last days; even in her last moments. We loved her family, and consider them friends.

We embrace Rachel when we arrive in her village now. We shake hands with Raimy and Johnson, and kiss Camirou's little nose, and remark how much his mouth resembles

Cavilla's. We have experienced what Brennan Manning calls "The common condition of being human" together.

Frederick Buechner said, "Maybe nothing is more important than that we keep track, you and I, of these stories of who we are and where we have come from and the people we have met along the way because it is precisely through these stories in all their particularity, as I have long believed and often said, that God makes himself known to each of us most powerfully and personally. If this is true, it means that to lose track of our stories is to be profoundly impoverished not only humanly but also spiritually."

Brigette

The only part of Brigette that wasn't skinny when we first met her was the tumor on her face. I've heard tumors described as "massive" before, but perched on top of her emaciated frame, Brigette's tumor looked impossible. Her Hemoglobin was 2.8. She weighed 21 kg. Her body shuddered when she tried to breathe. The tumor was bleeding her, starving her, and choking her.

We brought her immediately to the ship from screening. We started transfusing her, tube feeding her continuously, and, within days, placed a tracheotomy so she could breathe. Biopsies were taken and sent to England. As she breathed easier, and gained weight over the following weeks, surgery began to seem possible. The tumor continued to bleed, and smelled foul, and it appeared that the continuous nutrition and oxygen were only feeding the tumor. Her mother kept a continuous vigil at her bedside, wiping the saliva and blood from her perpetually open mouth.

But Brigette's personality could not be dissuaded by her physical weakness, her inability to smile or speak, or even move much with all the wires and tubes. In fact, as the days progressed, we grew more and more in love with her. At one point, while still unable to speak due to the trach, Brigette asked for a larger stuffed animal. She pointed to the tiny yellow duck, and motioned her hands, "bigger". Robyn and Cece Balcom assured her they would find her one. A medium sized pink bunny was their next attempt, but she still wanted something bigger. One she could "wrap her arms around," she gestured. Robyn returned with a giant, brown-and-white stuffed bulldog from Hold 2. It was so big, Robyn could barely fit her arms around its thick neck. "Is THIS what you had in mind?" Brigette's eyes grew wide, and waved her weakly frantic arms as Robyn approached, as if to say, "Get that thing away from me!" Robyn agreed, "It is kind of scary. We'll just put it up here so you can see it". But Brigette wanted nothing to do with it. She continued waving it away until Robyn complied. Brigette pointed to the pink bunny. "This color, but BIGGER!"

Everything about Brigette's tumor led Dr. Gary to believe it was malignant, but in his experience in Africa, things don't always follow the textbook. When Brigette's first biopsy results came back benign, Dr. Gary took it as a "green light" to operate. He was aware that if the tumors were not removed, Brigette would probably die in a matter of weeks.

Removing the "benign Adenoma" would remove the immediate threat to her life, and give Brigette a chance for long-term survival.

Finally, the decision was made to postpone three surgeries the following day, and try to work a miracle for Brigitte. After explaining everything to her mother that evening, Dr. Gary and Dr. Tony turned to leave the ICU. Andrew Mitchell watched as Tony took one last look at the 12 year old. Brigitte weakly raised one emaciated arm and waved and smiled with her eyes. Brigitte knew what they were discussing. She still could not speak or smile with her mouth, but even so, she wanted to say thank you.

Brigitte's surgery lasted more than 12 hours. Teams worked late into the night, trying to find creative ways to reconstruct her face. One portion of the tumor could not be excised, because it was too close to her brain, and removing it would risk losing blood supply to her brain. Dr. Gary hoped that without a blood supply, that part of the tumor would starve.

After surgery, Brigitte's recovery in the ward was tedious. She remained in the ICU for several weeks, as her body grew strong again.

Progress was marked in stages:

Brigitte breathed on her own.

Brigitte drank water.

Brigitte spoke.

Brigitte walked to aft deck.

Brigitte laughed.

Crew members from all departments loved her, and she loved to interact with everyone. She especially loved stickers, and dancing with Angelle at worship time, and having her toenails painted. Brigitte's laugh was famous.

Her skin grafts healed slowly, but within weeks, the gaunt, starving girl we knew transformed into a pot-bellied, chubby-cheeked giggly child. Only a few months ago, she was too weak to wipe her own chin, but now she charges through life with almost boundless energy. She couldn't smile before, but now, she can't stop.

During the marathon surgery, biopsies were taken from deep inside Brigitte's tumor. Several weeks ago, results of these tests showed that her tumor is not benign after all, but is a "Poorly differentiated Adenocarcinoma": an aggressive malignant cancer. The medical department consulted a local oncologist, and explored every possible avenue of treatment. All parties agreed that medically speaking, there is nothing that can be done. The cancer is too far advanced.

Because of the gravity of this information, the Medical Leadership team desired to give Brigitte's family time to adjust to this diagnosis. This gave the team time to pursue all possibilities of care before sharing the final prognosis with the ship's community. However, because so many of you have been involved with Brigitte's life, we felt that you should be aware of the full story.

Dr. Gary speaks of Brigitte with his characteristic respect and compassion: "I don't know what the status of her tumor is now... I don't know where she is... but I know there is room for prayer. Her immune system needs to overtake the cancer, and that would take a miracle. Otherwise, the natural course of events will lead to death. I do know that whatever the outcome is, she will live the rest of her life with dignity and value, having the joy of life returned to her." (a rough quote)

We will sail from Benin soon, and leave Brigitte in hands larger than our own. Medically speaking, there is nothing else we can do for her. And like Cavilla, our "failure" to save Brigitte depends only on how you see success and failure. Brigitte found a way to breathe again, to eat again, to smile and laugh and run, and hundreds of us had the priceless privilege of rubbing lotion on her legs, pushing her on the Aft Deck swing, receiving a slobbery kiss on the cheek, and (for those of us who consider these things privileges): suctioning the mucous from her trach, changing her betadine-soaked dressing, and creating a new inner cheek from the skin of her forehead.

Angelle

Angelle has been with us, on and off, since the beginning of the outreach. Her tumor, like Brigitte's puzzled Dr. Gary. It smelled bad and bled, and it was making it hard for Angelle get food into her mouth. Angelle's biopsy results didn't match Gary's expectations, but as with Brigitte, he decided to proceed with the surgery based on the information he had. But even before we could start treating her, Angelle found friends among the crew. DTS students Dan and Jenine Hall adopted her, and when they left for outreach, Zach and Shannon Johnson took over. Danny and Sandy Welch sat with her for countless evenings, drove her to appointments, and developed a strong friendship. Lucy Fayorsey volunteered to teach her to sew, and every nurse and translator who knows Angelle comments on her joyous demeanor, her generous smile, and enthusiastic participation in worship.

Angelle's life has not been easy, and it will continue to be this way. Her face still does not look "normal", though she will have one more surgery this month. She can't eat anything except mashed, milky foods, because half her teeth were removed along with the tumor in her maxilla. She will never have children of her own, because her uterus was removed last week to alleviate a long-standing problem of fibroids. The only family she has is an uncle she describes as "full of darkness". She has no marketable skills by which to support herself.

But Angelle still radiates joy. She wants to return to her town 3 hours from Cotonou and begin her life again. Crew members have arranged for her to continue sewing lessons, and someone even bought her a sewing machine. She will take with her a stack of photographs of people from around the world who love her.

And like the others, Angelle's success will never be measured by how well her "final photo" looks on a Mercy Ships brochure. Like Cavilla and Brigitte, Angelle allowed us to share her sacred and precious story. Life will continue to haunt and confound and fascinate us. In these situations, The Christ we have demonstrated is not a stoic, impersonal man who lived long ago, and blessed creatures with a passive wave of his hand. This Christ clothes himself in the skin of Anastasis Crew Members, and wipes noses, paints toenails, starts IV's, gives sewing lessons, and welcomes outcasts to his dinner table with a wide smile and physical affection...

...regardless of the "results".

So to keep from becoming "profoundly impoverished, humanly and spiritually" as Buechner warned, we will continue to keep track of and participate in these stories. These distressing disguises-that bleed and ooze and may even make us gag-these are

the very ones that win our hearts, and compel us toward the breathtaking recognition of our shared humanity.

Statistical Summary

Benin Outreach Statistics, February 16 2001: mercyships.org

Surgeries:

372 surgical procedures

329 patients (adults 215/children 114)

Maxillo-facial: 255 procedures

Eyes: 117 procedures

Dental:

1365 patients received treatments

2392 received dental teaching community Health Teams: Medical & Education

2756 treatments on 2011 patients (519 adults, 1492 children)

1236 adults and 998 children received community health teaching

Relief & Development Services:

Agla Medical Facility: 9x15m clinic/dispensary & 9x17m maternity/birth center.

Although one week behind schedule, the roof is completed on one building and trusses up on the second building. Clinic is 50% complete and birth center is 45% complete.

D4D Project and Water & Sanitation:

Grain storage/multi-purpose building is 98% complete; students are learning water & sanitation principles and building pilot latrine to replicate in their villages

Bethel Training Center at Vakon:

Students have completed ½ of their 6-month curriculum, focusing on woodworking and metalworking, learning how to create, construct, market and sell quality products.

Outreach Department: (Statistics to March 2, 2001)

9564 have heard/seen gospel presentations through Crosstide evangelism team, the counsellor/teachers, the crew outreach teams and the mercy ministry teams.

462 have prayed to commit their lives to Jesus Christ; 69 have prayed to recommit their lives; and 287 have asked for prayer for other needs.

Mercy Ministry Participants: 201

Love in Action

"Since 1978 Mercy Ships has had over 575 port visits in developing nations and developed nations, impacting over 2.42 million people with life-transforming surgeries and on-going community development." mercyships.org

Dear Reader,

It is my sincere hope that through reading the letters and stories contained in this book you were blessed by the testimony of God's love and faithfulness, encouraged to seek God's Kingdom with your whole heart, and inspired to continue or to begin your part in caring for our fellow human beings the world over.

There are certainly many wonderful charities and opportunities available, but as you can tell from these letters Mercy Ships is especially close to my heart. There are many ways you can partner with Mercy Ships whether through prayer, financial support, or serving onboard the ship or at a location on land.

Visit mercyships.org for information about how you can partner with this fantastic organization. I hope you will, it'll change your life.

With love,

Anisha

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