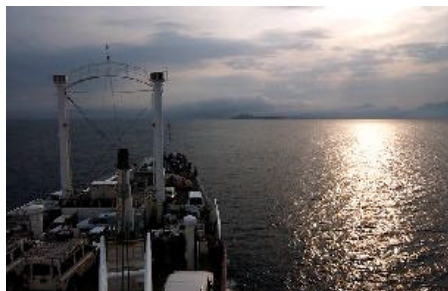


VICKI AND CHRIS GREGG ON THE MV ANASTASIS IN SIERRA LEONE



Clouds covered Lion Mountain and in the distance could be heard the sounds of an awaking African city. As the Anastasis moved through the waters past fishing boats and a multitude of jellyfish, the crew scanned the horizon for their first glimpses of Freetown, Sierra Leone. We moved closer and closer into view until the blur became details of shacks and concrete buildings, lush green forests and red clays streets, moving colours and blackened ruins. Sierra Leone at last!

It had been a long few months preparing for this moment – working long hours, dealing with personnel and technical challenges on the ship and busy European port visits. But now, we are here we are in one of the most needy countries in the world for 4 ½ months.

SIERRA LEONE IN A NUTSHELL

- ✂ Once known as 'The Jewel of West Africa' Sierra Leone is now the poorest nation on earth with a per capita income \$350 per annum
- ✂ Industry : mining diamonds, agriculture
- ✂ Lowest life expectancy in the world - around 45
- ✂ Highest maternal and infant mortality rate in the world (almost 2 out of 10 children will die)
- ✂ Literacy 21%
- ✂ Religions: Islam 55% Christian 25% Animist (ancestor and spirit worship) 20%
- ✂ Rebel war with mutilation, limb amputation and other abuse of civilians from 1992-1999
- ✂ Links to Al Qu'eda regime (weapon/diamond exchange)
- ✂ Fragile peace treaty signed in July 1999

SURGERIES

With an extra 15 beds on the new ward (that Vicki helped to refit during the summer) and a new eye unit in a container on the dock – the medical department has been able to accommodate even more patients. Surgeries include:

- ✂ Orthopaedic correction for children with club feet
- ✂ Maxillo-facial surgeries for cleft lip, tumours and facial reconstruction
- ✂ Gynaecology – VVF repairs for incontinent women
- ✂ Ophthalmic procedures for cataract, crossed eyes and to remove ugly diseased eyes
- ✂ Plastic surgery – to release burn contractures and smudge the initials of RUF branded on the girls and boys captured by the rebels and used as sex slaves



One new surgery that we are doing on the Anastasis – in addition to the usual tumour removals, eye surgeries and cleft lip operations, is to repair Vesicovaginal fistulas (VVF). These injuries occur when a woman in childbirth has an obstructed labour. A fistula occurs when prolonged and unrelieved pressure on the woman's pelvic wall causes a puncture in the bladder wall. It occurs primarily amongst teenage girls who are not fully developed themselves before pregnancy, but also in other difficult deliveries where there is no access to medical help at a hospital or maternity. After the woman gives birth to a stillborn, usually following a labour of 5-7 days, she constantly leaks urine and even in some extreme cases, faeces too. She will remain incontinent her whole life and endures much humiliation as a result. She is seen as an untouchable – often her husband will abandon or her family will disown her. Her clothes are always wet and dirty and people will ostracise her because she smells.

This is a picture of Sia, one of the first women to receive fistula surgeries onboard. She left the ship completely continent after years of living in disgrace. Before each woman leaves we have a ceremony of celebration in the new ward. After singing, dancing and prayer, we present each lady with a newly made dress - a gift symbolising the beginning of their new lives and the physical transformation that has taken place on the inside. A Mercy Ships fund also ensures that each woman will be able to have two Caesarean sections when they become pregnant again and are ready to deliver. This will prevent further childbirth complications and a recurrence of the fistula injury.

CHRISTMAS

Christmas on the Anastasis is a fun time with celebrations from many different nationalities, a feast on Christmas eve, a ball and Christmas movies on deck. Vicki helped out by working some shifts in the ward and Chris was one of the chefs for a British Christmas dinner for the 33 Brits on board. It was a real taste of home!



THE COMMUNITY HEALTH TEAM

"Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for life..." After seeing the poverty and despair in Sierra Leone, it's easy to want to hand out a quick solution. It's easy to give out food, water, medicine, clothing and shelter. Giving things is only a temporary solution though. People eat the fish ... and then they are hungry again.

The Community Health Team seeks to make a difference teaching others to help themselves. We hope that the result will bring in harvests of fish, and not just a catch for the day. Our aim whether teaching, giving vaccinations or holding clinics, is to give the people we serve as much of the responsibility as we can – working in partnership with locals as much as possible. We want to reverse the feelings of hopelessness and dependency by helping the people see that they do have the ability to make changes in their lives to improve their health and living conditions.

One of our projects is in a rural area 25 miles outside of Freetown called Western Koya where 16 villages remain sparsely populated since rebels almost destroyed their area in January 1999. We are teaching 41 students from the area not only how to prevent and treat diseases and life-threatening illnesses and how to stay healthy, but how to teach others. Other teams are working in the same area to train representatives from each of the villages in carpentry, masonry and welding so that their homes can be rebuilt and a water and sanitation team with help them restore their wells and build new latrines. Most families (including the children) have just one meal a day – or every other day, of rice and sauce at the moment so seeds and tools have also been distributed to help with the ongoing struggle to grow food.



VICKI'S PROJECTS

As a health teacher Vicki is leading 2 training courses – one in rural Koya another in an urban slum called Moyiba Town. Participants include nurses, school teachers and village chiefs, to pastors, traditional birth attendants and volunteers who cannot read or write.

Vicki is also helping with a vaccination programme immunising the under 5s against 6 killer diseases and women of childbearing age against tetanus.

She is also involved in some health teaching in schools and youth groups – primarily focussing on teenage pregnancy and HIV/AIDS.

CHRIS'S NEWS

The ship's email system is now more reliable now we have our new satellite system which provides us with permanent internet and telephone access where ever we are in the world, whether at sea or in port. The system is the same type as used on many cruise liners and it is supplied to Mercy Ships at a fraction of the commercial rate. It is great to have a such a good service and it is also saving Mercy Ships money! Our telephone number is 00 1 954 538 4258 (cost of call to US) if you would like to call us.

This week a water leak during a heavy rainstorm caused a total computer and communication blackout for a whole morning. Thanks to Vicki's hair drier, nothing was permanently damaged! Other than that, things are going quite smoothly – continued improvements are being made to the IT systems and a new member of staff is joining in February.

Chris is also going out one day a week with the Relief and Development Services team transporting supplies for the house building project. This is about 1 hrs drive from the port and is in one of the same areas that Vicki is training health teachers.

SO WHAT HAPPENS IN YOUR SPARE TIME?

There really is nothing much to do in Sierra Leone! We are rather stuck on the ship as the beaches are a long rough ride by landrover (and frequented by UN soldiers with guns) and there are no hotel swimming pools nearby to visit. Due to the security we are not allowed to travel outside of 'safe area' or after dark so that hampers the explorer spirit in us! So we are really pouring ourselves into our work and planning a break in Gambia – which is very visitor friendly by comparison. Vicki continues to lead 'Lighthouse' a club for some of the ship's kids and Chris does some DIY to improve our cabin and still eats lots of Kitkats – which were sent to us by friends in Guernsey! We also have cabin group (homegroup) and borrow videos to watch with friends in our cabin.



THE COTTON TREE CLUB

This is the name of the children's club we have started in one of the refugee camps in Freetown. Each Saturday Vicki and a team of others from the ship lead a club for between 200 - 250 children in the camp to try and bring a little light and hope into the lives of these children who are living in very difficult circumstances.

I was very shocked when I first saw the squalor that so many people are living in – TV pictures of camps in Africa had not prepared me for witnessing it myself. People crammed into makeshift tents, buildings, burned out buses – every conceivable space, open drains and children picking through the rubbish dumps for scraps of food. Over a third of the children in the camp have lost both parents in the war and are struggling to survive. Even those with parents are in desperate need. Last week I rescued a little boy and took him with his mother to a feeding centre. She had only a little rice to give him to eat and he was severely malnourished. At 2 years old, little Wuer weighed just 7.5 kg and looked like a little old man. Please pray for his recovery.

Over Christmas we told the children the Christmas story and had a puppet show, crafts and games. At the end of one session a little boy tugged at the edge of my dress and held up his simple craft of a star and asked me with real wonder in his face 'Is this my very own?' With tears in my eyes, I realised that his creation of cardboard and tin foil could quite possibly be his only possession in the world.

A further shock came to us all last week when we were talking about anger and bad thoughts and actions. We asked the children to draw pictures of the things they had done wrong. Imagine our horror when we were presented time and time again with pictures of people having their hands cut off, of bombs and guns, crying people, burning houses. I asked one boy who had drawn quite a graphic picture of someone being shot whether he had actually seen what he had drawn – he told me it was a picture of his own brother who had been killed in front of him. These horrific images of war and human mutilation are at the forefront of their minds.

Happy New Year to You All



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