

9 May '02
Fajara, The Gambia

Lamin looks up at me and almost smiles. His parents, less intimidated than he by the strange sounds and sights belowdecks, are more relaxed. Our greeting is limited by language to eye contact and a simple exchange of nods, but they understand why I am here, and they stand to follow me as I guide them back up the stairs from Lamin's appointment, then down again to the dock.

Lamin has a leg problem, and his family has no money. His age is hard for me to guess – many children here appear younger than better-nourished kids of the same age elsewhere. But as I wave the last traces of developing fluid from his X-rays down in the cramped confines of B-deck, I see the technician smiling, and I think I can read her mind: This one we can help.

It's good for me to meet people like Lamin and his family, because they remind me why I'm here in The Gambia. Some of the people you meet on the streets inevitably see you as just a target, a chance to scam some "rich" *toubabs* out of a few dalasis. There are always those. But there is need here, hard and brutal need that the government and social service agencies – such as they are – cannot hope to meet. Hence this second visit of the Anastasis in as many years, and the almost heartbreaking gratitude of people like Lamin's father and mother, whose names I will never know.

I will have plenty of stories and pictures when I return – in fact, I'm compiling the team's photographic records – but if you like, you can see some right now on the Mercy Ships website at www.mercyships.org. Follow the links for news updates from the Anastasis (not the Africa Mercy). You'll see articles about people I work alongside every day, as well as fascinating stories about some of the patients I've met. It's a great way to get an extra view inside my work here with the ship.

The work has been accelerating, too. My group is already on the last of our three rotations, and I've been traveling during the day with the ship's outreach teams. This week I spent two afternoons working alongside the Missionaries of Charity sisters (Mother Teresa's order), playing with orphaned toddlers and teaching two of the older ones the alphabet. Many of the kids there are not true orphans but simply children whose parents can no longer feed them. Some still have the swollen bellies and skin breakdown of hunger survivors, and most are much smaller than they should be, but they eat at a normal pace now, no longer riveted with frighteningly unnatural attention on the bowl of rice to which their world has narrowed. They still scream when you put them down, but in your arms they are utterly content.

It's going to be a strange transition back to the States for me after this, but I'll only be there for a month and a half. Yep, I've just accepted a position aboard the Caribbean Mercy, the ship in Latin America, beginning in July. I've signed up for a two-year commitment as Discipleship Training School staff, helping to lead teams just like the one I'm with right now. It's a slot I hadn't even known was going to be open, and I am very happy.

As you read this the Caribbean Mercy should be en route to Honduras, where I'll meet up with them this July if all goes well support-wise. I'll have the chance to see the eye surgery theatre in action, the same one I showed to so many tour groups last November and December while I was working on board. More to the point, though, I'll be lucky enough to witness the deeper changes in the lives not only of Hondurans and Haitians and Nicaraguans, but of

Nigerians and Swiss and Americans and more – all who come for the far-beyond-ordinary experience of a DTS on the ship. I won't be holding a scalpel, fortunately for everyone, but I will be very much on the front lines.

On the financial side of things, I am working on piecing together the relatively small but regular amount of support income I'll need to keep me out here over the next two years. Mercy Ships will be able to accept donations on my behalf directly once I step on the ship in late July. Until then, I'm checking out alternative options for making them officially tax-deductible in the meantime as well. So if you're excited by what I've been up to and want to be involved in that way, that would be wonderful. In any case, though, no matter what, please pray! I would love to keep sending out these updates to everyone who wants to get them, to keep you posted.

One thing you can pray for specifically is a man I recently met while riding with the ship's outreach team. He's an imam (high Muslim leader), educated in Egypt and Morocco, but he's very intrigued by Christianity. When the last DTS team left, they promised to find him the Arabic-language Bible he'd requested. When the ship returned two months ago, "Did you bring my Bible?" was the first sentence out of his mouth. He's responsible for guiding and educating an entire region, and his interest in Christianity is genuine. His name is Ibrahima Faye.

And one of the women in my group just spent an afternoon talking with a different Muslim leader, a cleric who walked up to the Mercy Ships team at the dental clinic last week. He announced he was through with Islam and asked them how he could find eternal life.

One of the things our team kept sensing a need to pray about very specifically, before we left Newcastle, was The Gambia's Muslim leaders. Thank you again for your prayers for me – they are making this real.

Jeremy

current postal: somewhere in Africa