



Publisher of the Daily Observer, Mr. Best, Mr. Tipoteh, Esther Biney and Mr. Don Stephens
 Don Stephens, Mercy Ship Founder and President Looks Back

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MONROVIA, The founder and president of MercyShip, the world largest hospital ship, has revealed that it must have been inspiration from his Norwegian great, great grand parents that helped him conceive the idea of building a ship to go around the world healing the less fortunate.

“My Norwegian great, great grand parents help built the first mission ship,” Mr. Don Stephens revealed.

“I cannot prove this, but I think that is what God was doing to bring me to the place to begin Mercy Ship. He must have wanted me to follow the footsteps of my forebears.”

If I go back many generations my Norwegian great, great grand parents help built the first mission ship in Norway.

He believes his Norwegian forbearers prayed for their children's children to follow in their footsteps. Otherwise why with an 19 year-old boy a thousand miles from the ocean be allowed by God to begin a hospital ship.

Mr. Stephens said he grew up in Colorado but is now living in Texas.

On his first cross cultural experience outside of the United States, Stephens recalled that a terrible storm hit the Caribbean island of the Bahamas, causing massive destruction. After the storm, said

Mr. Stephens, he heard a prayer from a teenage girl who said she wished there were a ship with doctors and nurses aboard that would provide help to people after such a disaster.

“I never forgot that teenage girl's prayer,” said young Stephens, himself a nineteen-year-old boy.

“The prayer touched me and that's when I began to think about the ship,” said Mr. Stephens, who was born June 13, 1945.

He said the second thing that kept his dream alive was a ship owned by the United States government called “The Hope,” which came to Africa to provide services.

The Mercy Ship founder said he and his wife Doyen Stephens read and studied everything about “The Hope,” and it became a model of what they are currently doing.

The father of four children, Mr. Stephens said he had a son named John Paul who was born with serious physical and medical difficulties.

Even though John Paul is now 32 years old, he can't speak; he doesn't feed himself. “But he is a wonderful son to my wife and me,” he asserted.

Mr. Stephens averred that there are challenges and difficulties that come in the lives of people that are not anticipated.

“John Paul helped us to open our eyes to the world, particularly to the developing world, and to people who are in dire need of help.”

“Little John Paul is the one God used to motivate us to do something that we have never done before,” he said. “He is part of our beginning.”

“John Paul has the ability to communicate through signs, and they love him dearly,” the MercyShip founder stated.

He noted that the fourth motivating factor was that he got to spend ten (10) days in 1977 with Mother Teresa in Calcutta, India.

Harboring his dream of building a hospital ship, he said he wanted to meet mother Teresa in order to learn how this “mother of mercy” started the her humanitarian work as the “Sisters of Charity.”

Mother Theresa arranged for him to go the center for the handicapped in Calcutta. The good Mother Teresa then told him that that God was going to use his little son John Paul as a voice “that would be heard by tens of thousands around the world.”

It was with this inspiration and his dream that 30 years ago, he said he left the French-speaking part of Switzerland on a train and went to Italy where he began looking for a ship.

It was in February, 1987, 30 years ago that he found the first ship.

The Daily Observer asked Mr. Stephens how he was able to raise

the money for such a major undertaking.

He replied that he went to several banks with his idea of building a medical ship to serve the world's underprivileged, and most of them told him he was neither a marine engineer, a doctor or an accomplished businessman; so how did he think he could enter such an unknown and untested field.

But thankfully, said Mr. Stephens, the Union Bank of Switzerland (UBS) developed faith in him and gave him the first one million dollars to buy his first ship.

He had met and befriended a shipping family in Switzerland, whose parents gave him encouragement. Twenty years later I once asked the father of this Swiss family whether he had put in a word on Stephens' behalf to the UBS. The father said yes he had. "And yes, that's how God made it possible for my wife and me to get the money!" Stephens said with excitement.

"I really think we can use two more ships in Africa, and one for Indonesia and another for the Philippines," he said.

The new Africa Mercy, Mr. Stephens disclosed, cost US\$62.5 million and, he added with joy and thanksgiving, "we are almost finished paying for it."

Mr. Stephens, who is due to leave Liberia today, said he would be returning in March and plans to be here at least once a month.

The visionary founder and MercyShip president summarized for the Daily Observer the four things prompted him to begin the extraordinary hospital ship venture. All four begin with the letter "S." First was the storm that struck the Bahamas Island in 1964, when he was only 19; second, the Ship "Hope;" the third, his severely handicapped son John Paul, who turned out to be a blessing to Stephens, his wife and family; and the fourth, his meeting with saint, Mother Teresa.

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