

Regina – an African miracle

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Introduction

The 17th March 1993 is a day I will never forget. While visiting the labour ward in the Princess Christian Maternity Hospital in Freetown I came across a very distressed 18-year-old called Catherine. She had been in obstructed labour for at least four days but she and her husband, Augustine, were poor and did not have the money required for a life-saving caesarean section.



Fig 1.
One day old

I paid \$100 for the operation (fig 1) and nearly two decades later the 'baby' herself is now 18-years-old. It was my great privilege to travel to West Africa to join her on the *Africa Mercy* for the last 12 days of six weeks working as a volunteer on board.

In the UK

Regina arrived at Heathrow on an Emirates flight from Perth (Australia) via Dubai on November 27th to spend a week at our home in Ascot before flying out to Freetown to join the ship. While she was in the UK she did work experience at the hospital in Basingstoke where I am a consultant (fig 2) and also read the final Lesson



Fig 2.
Work experience student

at the Mercy Ship's carol service in Southwark Cathedral on December 1st (fig 3).



Fig 3.
Southwark Cathedral, London

John 1, verses 1-14 was tough for a jetlagged young woman, but she was word perfect.

'Uncle Keith' bought her a Christmas/birthday present from Jessop's in Oxford Street, a new Canon Eos Digital SLR, a special Christmas deal which included a free 80-300mm lens worth nearly £200. I remember joking with the young salesman that I was not a 'dirty old man' and told him the story.

Sierra Leone

Regina arrived on the *Africa Mercy* in Freetown at the beginning of December (fig 4).



Fig 4.
In Freetown

She took the opportunity to visit family members including her grandmother (fig 5) and her uncle (fig 6).



Fig 5.
With her grandmother in Freetown

On board the ship she shared a cabin with nine other girls and worked in the



Fig 6.
With her uncle



Fig 7.
Serving food

dining room serving food (fig 7) and



Fig 8.
Washing up

doing the washing up (fig 8). She then sailed on the ship to Tema in Ghana where my wife and I joined her on the 30th December (fig 9).



Fig 9. With my 'African daughter'

Ghana

On New Year's day Regina and I took a taxi into the university area of the city to attend a service at Legon International Church (LIC) (fig 10). Before travelling to Australia in 2005 she had lived with her family in the Madina district of Accra for five years after they had fled from persecution in Guinea in 2000.

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Fig 10.
LIC 1st Jan 2012



At the church she was delighted to meet several people (fig 11) including the pastor who remembered her and her family, from nearly seven years before.

Fig 11.
With old friends
outside LIC



I took the opportunity to visit Korle Bu, the main teaching hospital in Accra, and give two presentations to the anaesthetic department. This consisted of 24 doctors and only 19 anaesthetic nurses – an unusual ratio for Africa. I discussed with consultant Frank Boni the possibility of organising a two-day conference in May.

Sailing to Togo

On the 6th of January the 'Africa Mercy' left Tema (fig 12) for the Port of Lome. Actually sailing on board a Mercy Ship was a new experience for me after 21 years involvement with charity.

Fig 12.
En route to Togo



After a 10 hour cruise on a calm sea we arrived on time at our destination to be met by a welcoming committee included various dignitaries (fig 13). The latter showed remarkable patience during the time it took to position the gangway (fig 14).



Fig 13.
Waiting committee
on the docks

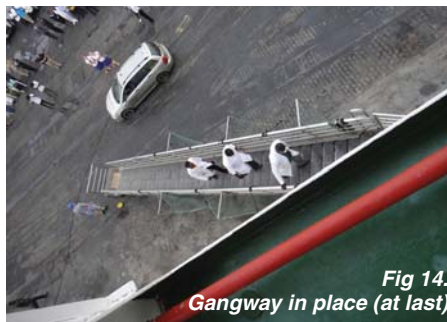


Fig 14.
Gangway in place (at last)

While in Togo I met Dr Mousou Tabana, a local anaesthetist, at the Sarakawa Hotel to discuss arrangements for a possible anaesthesia conference in May. Sadly the Frenchman who managed the hotel on my previous visit two years before had been brutally murdered in Abidjan during the recent conflict. This occurred after the incumbent Ivorian president Laurent Bagbo refused to step down after losing the election.

Regina and I, with South African friends, visited the local market, (fig 15) guided by William Akpa



Fig 15.
Lome market

who I had originally met in a Lome taxi in 1995. I subsequently helped him do a computer course and then set up an internet café (fig 16) with



Fig 16.
With William
outside the
internet café

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computers provided by an Edinburgh-based charity called 'Re-using IT.' He now uses the facility to teach school children computing during the day and as an internet café in the evenings (fig 17).



Fig 17.
William's internet café

Departing

Leaving the ship in Togo (fig 18) to travel back to Ghana in many ways was a remarkable experience.



Fig 18.
Africa Mercy
in Lome docks

Regina had become incredibly popular on board; everyone seemed to know her (fig 19).



Fig 20.
With friends

I remember talking to the captain of the ship near the onboard Starbucks café when she put her arm round him and said 'uncle take a picture of us' – a very confident gesture for an 18-year-old (fig 20).



Fig 20.
With Captain Tim

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Four days before we left the ship I purchased a bible from the ship's shop and arranged for as many people as possible to write a short message in it for her – a total of 51 signed this lasting memento which she tearfully received on the day we left. As we departed she took a photo of myself with Dr Gary Parker (fig 21) who had been the resident maxillofacial surgeon on a Mercy Ship for the past 26 years. He was in Sierra Leone when Regina was born in 1993.



Fig 21. Two old friends

We had an uneventful trip through both the Togolese and Ghanaian border posts where we were collected by taxi driver Abecu for the four hour drive back to friend Stella's new house in Accra. Waiting outside for us was a nine-year-old called Gloria and her mother Mercy. Gloria has Blount's disease resulting in very bowed legs (fig 22) and was looking for help to find a surgeon who might make her look normal.



Fig 22. Gloria - Blount's disease

The return flight from Accra was uneventful apart from the challenging drive to the airport. We had to deviate through all sorts of interesting places to avoid road works and a broken down bridge.

We passed a Turkish restaurant whose name we hoped did not reflect the standard of the food (fig 23)!



Fig 23. Must try the food!

My wife and I were upgraded to First Class from our BA Air miles club class seats – an interesting experience but unfortunately the flight didn't leave until 11.30pm so one was more interested in sleep on the flat wide bed-like seat rather than the exclusive food and wines served for dinner at 1am.

Regina returned to Australia three days later to be reunited with her parents and two-year-old brother Derek (fig 24).



Fig 24. Brother and sister

A few weeks later she began training to become a nurse at the Edith Cowan University in Perth.



Fig 25. Oct 2011-family at her graduation from school

It has been my great privilege to be involved with this family for the past 19 years.

Regina is a very remarkable young woman who lived for the first 13 years of her life as a refugee in Guinea and Ghana and then for the next seven as a migrant in Australia, initially in Wollongong and then Perth.

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She has a 'world experience' which has given her an ability to relate to people of different ages, backgrounds and cultures which I am sure will serve her well in the future (fig 26).



Fig 26. Life is great!

Her personal mantra is: *what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.*