

"THE SUM OF LITTLE THINGS"



For 20 years, Dr. Charles Ford has used his ENT skills to bring joy to hundreds of children in Kenya. His work took on greater meaning this spring when it became a shared family endeavor.

The marathon week in Kenya was grueling. High-pressured. Exhausting. And Dr. Charles Ford is ready for more.

The 66-year-old otolaryngologist from Boone, North Carolina, has been making the annual trip to the AIC-CURE International Children's Hospital in Kijabe for two decades. "By now I know what to expect, I am fond of the people I work with, and I enjoy doing cleft lip surgeries," he said. "I think it makes me a better surgeon because the work is so exacting."

Ford was part of a team of 19 surgeons, nurses, and other volunteers who performed the cleft lip surgeries in March. World Medical Mission sent a second team to the hospital in June, and a third group will be bringing smiles to the faces of boys and girls this fall. Some will be first-time patients. Others will be youngsters who are returning for additional work, such as palate surgery.

"When we say we're coming back, the staff know we will be back, and they know they will see some of the same team year after year," said Ford. "That consistency isn't found everywhere in Africa. It's a beautiful picture of good healthcare because without good follow up, you can't know if you have done a good surgery."

Ford estimates that he has performed close to 600 cleft lip surgeries at the children's hospital. He thrives in the demanding environment.

"Every cut has to be precise. There's no room for error. If your work on a person's lip is off by even a fraction of a millimeter, it is noticeable," he explained. "Doing cleft lip surgery is all about the sum of little things that ultimately produce a good result."

Their success depends on a spirit of teamwork with a deeply-rooted trust in God and each other. Delicate surgery is one of many challenges. If a child has health problems such as tuberculosis or malaria, surgery of any kind could be life-threatening.

During a previous trip to Kenya, the World Medical Mission cleft lip team made new friends while visiting a Maasai village.



Dr. Charles Ford was excited to have his son-in-law, Dr. Joseph Garner (top right, below), join him in the operating room. Several of Dr. Ford's grandchildren (including some of the Smith family pictured below right) made stuffed animal toys for the youngsters who underwent surgery.



That's why it takes a team of specialists who can provide basic healthcare and do a thorough examination. Sometimes this means telling disappointed parents that surgery is not recommended or must be delayed.

The cleft lip and palate repairs are available for children regardless of their family's economic situation. World Medical Mission volunteers charge no fees for their services. The children's hospital also partners with an organization called Smile Train that helps defray the costs for care.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

This year's trip to Kijabe held special significance for Ford because he brought his son-in-law, Dr. Joseph Garner, with him. Garner was wrapping up his final year of medical school at East Tennessee State University and was excited to go on his first overseas missions adventure.

"Joe said it was the best thing he has ever done—next to marrying my daughter," said Ford. "He helped me in surgery and I taught him a little bit about surgical technique. I think he gained tremendously from the experience."

Dr. Ford (in black shirt near center) and Dr. Garner (back row, far right), were part of a team of 19 volunteer medical professionals who performed cleft lip surgeries in March.



"It's a gentle reminder that God is the One who holds the keys to life and death, and He is the One who heals."

Now Garner is doing residency training at the University of Florida and is specializing in otolaryngology. He may be doing more short-term missions work in the future.

"I'm very proud of him," Ford said.

Ford's experiences on the mission field have inspired the youngest members of his family to

want to get involved. He and his wife, Diane, are blessed to have 23 grandchildren, and it is his hope that one day he can take some of them to Kenya.

In the meantime, half of them found a way to contribute to their grandfather's and Uncle Joe's mission efforts by making stuffed animals for the children who received cleft lip surgery.

Last year five grandchildren initiated the project by making animals native to Kenya, such as elephants, lions, and snakes. In January the project gained momentum as more of the children wanted to make soft, cuddly toys for the patients. In just a couple of months they sewed more than 50 stuffed animals. Their grandfather had to carry extra luggage to transport the treasures.

"They have heard the stories about Kenya

and wanted to be a part of doing something," said Ford. "And when those kids set their mind to do something, they don't stop."

Their simple but heartfelt gifts brought delight to the young patients in Kijabe, some of whom smiled for the first time after recovering from their procedures. It was the sum of these small blessings that will continue to make a life-changing impact on the Kenyan girls and boys and their families.

Ford said he tries to use his work as a surgeon to project God's love and communicate the Gospel to the parents. With the help of an interpreter, he likens the child's visage before surgery to God's view of humanity left marred by sin: "After the surgery, their child may now look perfect in their eyes. Likewise, after we have Christ in our life and receive His forgiveness through the shedding of His blood for us, we can now look more perfect in our heavenly Father's eyes."

Of all of the Kenyan patients he has had the privilege of operating on over the past 20 years, Ford remembers most vividly the 2-year-old boy on whom he performed

his first cleft palate surgery. Complications developed during the procedure and would have led to tragic results without God's intervention.

The toddler's tongue swelled and Ford had to do an emergency tracheostomy. The desperate doctor cried out to God to spare the child's life. He stayed with the boy day and night for 72 hours. The child pulled through. During his recent March trip, Ford talked to a Kenyan pastor who said that boy has grown up to become a fine young man.

It's a gentle reminder that God is the One who holds the keys to life and death, and He is the One who heals. "I've always wanted to see the boy, just to know how he is doing," said Ford. "It would be really nice to see him again." 🌍

