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Bintou's Life is Whole Again

Mercy Ships and Alcon – A Partnership that Spans More than 25 Years

Mercy Ships, a faith-based global charity established in 1978, serves the poorest of the poor in the developing world through hospital ships invited by host nations to serve the dire needs of their population. The Mercy Ship, Africa Mercy, has five fully equipped operating rooms with two of them dedicated to ophthalmic education for the Alcon fellowship training program.

Alcon and Mercy Ships have partnered together for more than 25 years to work towards a shared goal of eliminating preventable blindness. Our partnership has led to the creation of sustainable programs that meet the eye care needs of thousands of people in western Africa.

Through the donation of innovative products and support with cash funding, Alcon has enabled the Mercy Vision program to expand into 14 countries within two continents, and reach even more people in need. The Alcon Fellowship Training Program has enabled Mercy Ships doctors to provide hundreds of hours of training to local surgeons. In turn, the Alcon Fellows have then been able to share what they have learned with other local surgeons, thus broadening the impact of Mercy Ships' initiatives in meeting the eye care needs of the people of western Africa.

Read about Bintou, one of the many people whose sight – and life – have been enhanced thanks in part to the 25-year partnership between Alcon and Mercy Ships. To learn more about Mercy Ships and the important work they do, visit www.mercyships.org/giftofsight.

Bintou's Story

When Bintou was six months old, her parents noticed a white spot on her right eye. At first they thought her eye was just made that way. But when they compared her eye to her twin brother's eye, they knew something was definitely wrong. But, what?

Bintou and her family lived in Conakry, the capital of Guinea. They were extremely poor, struggling to have enough money for daily rice. Going to a hospital or medical clinic was completely out of the question. Even if a doctor knew what was wrong with Bintou's eye, they could never afford treatment, medications, or a hospital stay.

Over the next year, Bintou's situation grew worse. The white spot now covered her right eye completely, and another spot was forming on her left eye. She was virtually blind, able only to distinguish night from day.

In desperation, her parents begged and borrowed money until they had the \$8.00 needed to buy a lotion recommended by a traditional healer. Bintou's father Amadou explains, "The traditional healer told us that there was a bad curse behind Bintou's condition. He said that sorcery had been used to make Bintou blind."

Amadou did not believe that his innocent daughter was cursed – but, with no other alternative, he felt compelled to buy the lotion. Amadou sadly reported the results: “After faithfully washing Bintou’s eyes and face with the lotion, the truth was revealed – the lotion made no difference.”

The family coped as best they could. Bintou’s twin brother, Mohamed, was a fixture at his sister’s side. Their father recalls, “Mohamed, at a very young age, seemed to understand that Bintou needed his help and protection. His love for her made sure that she was loved by everyone around her. While many people pitied Bintou, they were always good to her, thanks to what Mohamed showed them.”

When Bintou was four years old, the family decided to ask the local Catholic Mission to help their daughter. They had heard that the mission did many good things for poor people and that they cared for abandoned children. According to Amadou, it was a big step to take. “We prayed for Bintou’s healing, and we had faith that God would bring that healing. But what could the Catholic Mission do? Still, I felt God pushing me to take this step, so we did.”

Amadou clearly recalls what the Sister at the Mission said to him. “They told me that they could not help heal Bintou’s blindness, but that a ship that was coming. They assured me that we were not to worry, that Bintou was still young and that her healing would come. All we had to do was wait.”

The waiting caused great anxiety, especially when the time came for Bintou to go to school. Amadou says, “The worst thing was that Bintou is very smart. She is smarter than her brother – but, because of her blindness, she could not go to school. I knew that, without her sight, her life would be broken.”

Just as Bintou’s twin brother was getting ready to start his second year of school, a radio announcement said a hospital ship was coming to Conakry to provide free medical care. Amadou felt an incredible relief and joy. What the Sisters had told him was true – Mercy Ships was coming to bring hope and healing.

A few months later, Bintou’s father brought his daughter to the *Africa Mercy* hospital ship to have her cataracts removed. Volunteer Kim Strauss recalls the moment after Bintou’s surgery when her patches came off: “Even though Bintou’s sight was not completely restored, she had good side vision. She could see her younger brother and catch the ball he threw to her. Bintou’s father grabbed Dr. Glenn Strauss, my husband who did the surgery, shaking his hand and hugging him. He exclaimed over and over how we had given sight back to his entire family.”

Bintou’s sight is expected to improve steadily over the coming months, following her cataract surgery that, according to Dr. Strauss, “is quite a complex procedure on children, compared to what is needed for adult cataract removal. Because young eyes cannot be laser treated, the work is more extensive. The steps involve removing the cataract, removing any further impediments, like scarring, and preventing any haze forming. Special training and equipment are needed.”

For Bintou’s family, they can think of no greater blessing than having Mercy Ships come to Guinea. As Amadou says with deep conviction, “Thanks to Mercy Ships, my daughter’s life is whole again and filled with the sight she needs to have a good future.”