

2011 Humanitarian Mission Scholarship Report

Operation Smile: Marrakech, Morocco
Jeanne Going, MS, RN, CPAN, CAPA

As 2011's recipient of ASPAN's Humanitarian Mission Scholarship, I would like to sincerely thank ASPAN for helping me to provide care to the children of Marrakech, Morocco, October 6-15, 2011.

I am a volunteer for Operation Smile, an international children's medical charity that heals children's smiles, forever changing their lives. Because every three minutes a child is born with a cleft, and is many times unable to eat, speak, or attend school, our work is always needed. Operation Smile has a presence in over 60 countries, and has provided more than two million patient evaluations and over 200,000 free surgeries for children and young adults born with cleft lips, cleft palates, and other facial deformities since 1982.

Our medical team to Marrakech of over 50 medical professionals was able to successfully provide medical consultations to 315 individuals, and provide 127 people with 147 free surgical procedures. And, although we touched the lives of each of these patients and family members, the gifts of this mission were truly ours – new memories and friendships, and the chance to have been a part of a truly special and worthwhile endeavor.

Each and every story of those for whom we cared was memorable and precious to me. Sanaa is one of those stories. Sanaa is 10 years old and lives in Safi, 150 kilometers from Marrakech. Sanaa is an orphan. She has a foster family, but lives in very poor conditions and her family does not have the means to provide her with surgery. Sanaa is very different than other children with cleft lips and cleft palates because she does not let her deformity keep her from going to school. Many children such as Sanaa are shunned, and hidden from the public. At school, Sanaa has friends, but sometimes they ask her, "How can you look at yourself in the mirror? You look like a monster." It was Sanaa's teacher who brought her to our mission site. Her teacher knew about the mission through the Internet and collected money among his friends to rent a car and bring her to us, along with a friend who could drive the car. Sanaa was chosen for surgery, wore her best outfit on surgery day, and did her hair for the occasion as well. Both her lip and palate were corrected, and she looked beautiful after the surgery. Because her teachers had to leave immediately after the surgery, it was our medical team that took turns sitting at her bedside to keep her company and to help her recover. In addition, because the postoperative floor in Marrakech was one open room, we engaged all of the other parents in the room to look after her. She became loved by all. I know that because of our work, she will do big things in her life to come.

Another child we helped to correct was Issaa El Amria, a beautiful seven-month-old girl with bright, big, brown eyes, olive skin, and a primary cleft lip. Her surgery was quick and simple, but made a remarkable difference. Later in the day after her surgery was complete, her mother came to me and told me that she wanted her husband (Issaa's father) to have a chance to be beautiful as well. Issaa's father also had a primary lip, which was hidden by facial hair and difficult to see. Our team stayed late that night in order to add her father to our surgery schedule, and father and daughter received new smiles together, years in age apart.

Again, I thank ASPAN for the scholarship money that provided me the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of so many individuals. As David Chong, an Operation Smile plastic surgeon has said, "How precious is one life? How much more does that one life affect other lives? Even more so, how much does that one life affect our own?"

My son tells me that going on these mission trips is my way of "building bricks in my house in heaven." Maybe he is right – or maybe having the opportunity to make such a difference in a world so full of need is heaven itself.

From my heart,

Jeanne Going, MS, RN, CPAN, CAPA

Photos by Marc Ascher, Photographer, Operation Smile.



Sanaa





Issaa and her father