

A Confidence Behind Every Smile by Phoenix Kim

Kathy Magee can never forget the moment a mother brought a basket of bananas as a token of appreciation for her newfound hope that her daughter may be able to smile with joy for the first time.

It's the small acts of appreciation like this or even just a warm smile that makes Magee's job so heartwarming. She is a former clinical social worker and co-founder of Operation Smile along with her husband William Magee Jr. The organization is a non-profit that operates in countries all around the globe. Their goal is to provide surgery to children with cleft lip and palate conditions, specifically for the less fortunate children in developing countries.

"Our hope is that in the future, no child will suffer or die because of this deformity," Magee said.

According to the Nationwide Children's Hospital, in Columbus, Ohio, a cleft palate condition is a birth defect that occurs most commonly in babies of Asian, Latino, or Native American descent. It's a condition where there is a gap in the mouth due to complications during pregnancy. Often, in the US, these conditions are dealt with early on in infancy. However, in smaller developing countries children are unable to gain access to affordable healthcare and suffer with this condition for many years until they receive treatment. In order to receive proper nutrition, they are forced to drink rather than eat their food. In addition, because the opening is vulnerable to infections, they have to frequently take antibiotics. Many children with the condition also suffer from a speech impediment. Sadly, they also endure social abuse and emotional issues.

"Emotionally, they are pretty drained," Magee said. "They're just made fun of. You can go all around the world and even in the US, people can be very mean." Many children in smaller countries with the condition are demoralized and are unable to attend school.

Before Operation Smile was founded, Magee and her family were asked to tag along on a mission trip to the Philippines to treat children with cleft lip and palates. The small group treated 30-40 children at a time. However, when they reached the city of Naga, 300 children showed up to receive treatment.

"We were all shaking. Where is this coming from, how are there so many children?" Magee said.

After being unable to treat all the children, the small team sadly departed from Naga, leaving many untreated patients.

"We don't feel good," Magee said. "We just couldn't believe what we saw. Hundreds and hundreds of people with clefts and their families making a dollar or two a day, just wanting their child taken care of. So I just feel like that was the incentive and it drove us." Operation Smile expanded to a larger team and went back to Naga in order to operate on the many more children seeking surgery.

"We would go back there, and another one of the islands asked us to come there, and another country,

Kenya. So that really was the kickoff of why we did what we did," Magee said.

The most rewarding part of Operation Smile's organization is the small acts of kindness that families return in favor.

"A little mom with her daughter came to us while we were there and she had a little basket with bananas in it and she gave us those and said, 'thank you for trying to take care of my child,'" Magee said.

It's the little things like these that push Magee and the rest of Operation Smile to keep on providing treatment to these children.

One of Operation Smile's biggest goals is to allow their patients to gain confidence after being outcasts in society for such a long time.

"Now after the surgery, that's a different story. They realize they can eat, they can speak, they can go to school. And they can be back in life," Magee said.

Nowadays, Operation Smile has expanded to a much larger global scale and operates in 60 countries all around the world while providing over 200,000 surgeries. Even Magee is unable to process how large of an organization Operation Smile has become.

"We never thought about it," said Magee. "Would we ever think we would be in 60 countries? No. Not at all."

Although COVID has shut down many of these mission trips, Magee is hopeful for the future of the organization. They launched their World Journey of Hope campaign where they went around the world, traveling to 18 countries in nine weeks while treating patients as well as teaching surgeons and doctors native to the country how to perform palatoplasty surgery.

Operation Smile also launched another campaign, the World Journey of Smiles.

"We went around the world in one week and operated on 4500 kids," Magee said. "And we opened centers. And those centers do all the comprehensive care: speech, or have dental work, or just look at their nutrition or psychosocial health."

Due to their previous campaigns, these smaller countries can now operate without the help of Operation Smile during the pandemic and moving forward. Magee is extremely grateful to be a part of this non-profit and loves the sight of a confident smile on every child's face.

"This organization evolved because of the care and love and leadership of the people that are involved," Magee said. "And what they do is fill the world with better healthcare."