

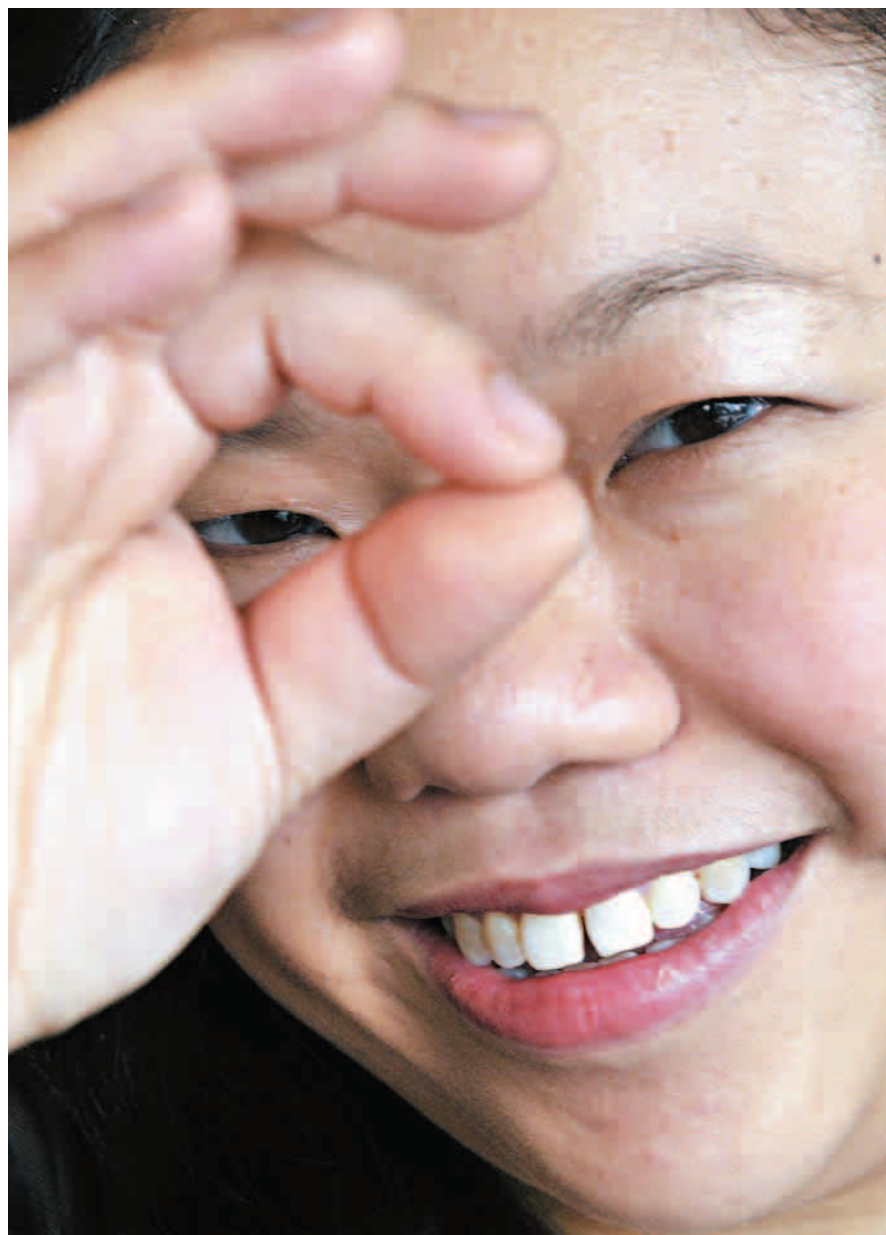
Joyce Samoutou-Wong

The co-founder of New Sight tells **Oliver Chou** how she came to establish the first eye clinic in the Republic of Congo.

MY LIFE

AFRICA CALLING I'm an ordinary Hong Kong girl, but I've had a thing for Africa since I was two years old. I don't know why, I wasn't into safaris or Tarzan. It could have been the stories told by the missionaries at the church my parents took me to. I thought all of my peers were interested in Africa, too, but my best friend called me crazy when I asked her if she was. After I finished secondary education, at Diocesan Girls' School, I went to the United World College of the Atlantic, in the UK, on a full scholarship. I was one of 360 students from 80 countries. That was the time of the Bosnian conflict and the genocide in Rwanda. These events were more than just newspaper reports to me, as friends and relatives of my fellow students were affected. That really changed my perspective. Later, I took up medicine at the University of Edinburgh as I thought it was a portable skill that could be used everywhere. In my fifth year, I spent two months in Africa, to work out whether this was really what I wanted to do. After those two months – and not a day more – I planned to return to Hong Kong to find a nice Chinese boy, because Edinburgh is a desert in terms of its Chinese population. I landed in Gabon in November 2000 with a big bag of long-held dreams and excitement about the rainforest and African people. I told myself I might find my destiny there, but it turned out to be utterly miserable. What I saw were loving and generous missionaries working in very tough conditions. And there I was, a selfish and spoiled brat who couldn't iron a shirt and who freaked out over snakes and spiders. I was an only child and didn't like things to be difficult or inconvenient. I liked things fast and efficient. But while battling with myself one morning, I resolved that if this was what God really wanted me to be, I would do it. The next day, I met Henri Samoutou – he was a nurse, now he's my husband and the father of our three children.

IN SYNC I didn't think too much about him on the day we met. Then, that night, at about 3am, I woke up in tears, and



knew he was going to be the man I married. I had no idea where my love for him came from. Perhaps I had gone crazy in the rainforest. Now, I feel there had always been a connection between us. We belong to the same church. While I went to the branch in Hong Kong and he went to a branch in Gabon, we were baptised on the same day: April 19, 1992. But we came from totally different worlds. He speaks French and the only English he knew was 'Coca-Cola'. I spoke the little French I learned at school. Our personalities were also different. I am fast and he is calm and laid-back. We later did a per-

sonality test: he achieved a perfect score but I fell into the 'dangerous' category. We first had just two weeks together, followed by four years of communication – not by e-mail or phone, but by handwritten letter. These letters – boxes of them – became proof of our relationship when UK immigration officials challenged our marriage, in 2004. But I didn't have any proof for my worried parents. I've always been a daddy's girl and they had every reason to worry about my decision to marry someone from such a different background. I think the penny dropped when they came to see us and saw that

we were compatible despite our differences. It goes without saying that their three grandchildren – Cherissa, six, Ezra, three, and Karis, one – have played their part, too.

VISION STATEMENT From 2006 to 2008, Henri and I were involved in an eye project in Gabon funded by the Christian Blind Mission. He was the clinic director, an ophthalmic technician and cataract surgeon. I was the project administrator and a family doctor at the missionary hospital the clinic was attached to. Hundreds of patients would come to the clinic and we operated on 10 or so a day, three days a week. When we took the bandages off the patients' eyes the day after the operation, we were as excited as they were about their regained sight – which they previously accepted had gone for good. But patients' reactions varied. One man's wife was worried he was going to kill her on seeing her. But all left their canes behind as they wouldn't be needing them anymore. So 9.30am, the time the bandages were removed, was my favourite time of the day. It wasn't just about the patients regaining their sight – their entire lives were transformed. Their families often started singing and dancing at the clinic. They were magical moments and I feel honoured to have played a humble role in that process.

SIGHT UNSEEN We returned to Leeds [in northern England] and started working at the local hospital, but our hearts never left Africa. When we learned there wasn't even one eye clinic in the Republic of Congo, we decided to establish New Sight. Congo's Pioneer Christian Hospital is providing us with a general clinic to start with, but we've had to get our own equipment. To raise the initial start-up funding of HK\$1.25 million, I returned to my hometown earlier this year. Hong Kong may be small geographically, but it has a big heart. We've been humbled that local people, who are always so busy, have stopped and listened to us, and have been prepared to give. I feel Hong Kong is sending me to the heart of Africa to bring hope, light and new life.

For further information about New Sight, visit www.samoutou.com