

A sight to behold: the Samoutous changing lives in their Congo clinic

March 12, 2012 by uwclife | 1 Comment



Family of 5 as we prepare to go to Congo

By **Paolo Danese** (Pearson 01-03), Uwc Life editor

After attending UWC Atlantic , Joyce (née Wong) went off to the University of Edinburgh to study Medicine. Today, she is about to move from the UK to the Republic of Congo to set up the first and only eye clinic with surgery in the history of the country. Between those two moments, Joyce has already had quite the adventure.

Although she described herself as “an ordinary Hong Kong girl,” she talks with enthusiasm of her backpacking trip around China from college times, her travels to Thailand to volunteer as a primary school teacher (while living in a tree house!), and of her work in Uzbekistan among field medics on the Ancient Silk Road.

KURT HAHN

"There is more in you than you think" —Kurt Hahn

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Joyce first set off for Africa in 2000: a trip to Gabon among medical missionaries which was both the “realization of a dream” as well as the enduring of hardships that were equally great and daunting. She thought she could not stay in Africa but one day, after a long walk on the beach, she understood that her true calling was to be there. Meeting Henri, her future husband, a native of Gabon, just one day after making that decision just made her choice that much stronger.

Both moved to the UK for post-graduate studies and work but soon enough they were again off to Gabon for two years. They both worked on an eye clinic there and saw hundreds of life transformed by simple cataract operations. The cost: HKD 625. Routine surgeries in many countries, which in Gabon tore people out of decades of avoidable blindness.

They returned to Europe, but their mind was set on a decision which Joyce describes with the following words: “It is crazy to go, but crazier not to.”

Craziness means that if in Gabon they had to deal with frequent electricity cuts and few places where to buy everyday items, well, the Republic of Congo will be even tougher

To make matter more complex, help is not easy to find. Joyce tells of the response they had from the World Health Organization, which in 1999 has launched Vision 2020, with the goal of eliminating all avoidable causes of blindness in the world by the year 2020. They obtained positive responses and encouragement, but no funds from the Vision 2020 NGO members. With the world in recession, new initiatives are seldom supported, no matter how relevant. When in need to set up a surgery room where a single piece of equipment, like an operating microscope, costs around HKD 200,000, it makes it all that much harder.

Joyce describes the new meanings “multi-tasking” will soon have for her in Africa. Among many: home-

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schooling her three kids, setting up the clinic, installing the internet and solar panels, accounting and fundraising for New Sight Congo, the charity they founded in 2010.

It is a testimony to an immense will power that when asked about such difficulties, Joyce says: “for every challenge in life, it ultimately comes down to your heart.”

To drive the point home, she recalls the time when her daughter, now 6, lost her front teeth. As in the tradition, she patiently awaited for the tooth fairy to reward her. And she was not disappointed to find HKD 20 the next morning. With the money she bought ingredients. With those ingredients, she prepared cupcakes that raised more money. Part of that money went to printing cards that were then used for another fundraising initiative. The result: her daughter’s tooth fairy prize was raised to HKD 625. She had just paid for a person’s cataract operation, changing the life of a stranger forever.

The last question Joyce answers is possibly the most important: “How can we help?” Needless to say, as the initiative still needs to keep on raising funds for anything from medical supplies and equipment to upgrading the clinic’s electrical systems, contributing financially is important. Beyond that, though, there is the crucial part about just letting Joyce and her family know that the alumni community has heard and supports them: thus, sign up for the newsletter, send a note, join sponsorship initiatives (all links are below). New Sight Congo being a relatively small organization, all help will have a big, visible and direct impact.

It ultimately comes back to that special UWC craziness to do something like this. Once you have met and shared so much with those from the troubled areas of the world, it becomes harder to look away. Joyce quotes the Proverbs in the Bible: “Do not withhold the good from people to whom it is due when it is in your power to act.” One thing is certain, the Samoutou

family will soon be hanging a few more walking sticks on their wall (see picture below).



Walking sticks left by the blind who now see

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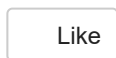
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