



All photos courtesy of Scott Harrison

Capturing mercy

ON FILM

By Fayola Shakes

For nearly 10 years, photojournalist Scott Harrison's workdays were New York City's nightlife. After starting an event planning and nightclub consultancy with a friend, Harrison organized some of New York City's biggest bashes for clients including MTV, record labels, and Nike. The fringe benefits were appealing: supermodels on his speed dial and exotic vacations.

Though his life appeared enviable from the outside, last year a turn of events Harrison describes as dramatic as Lot's exit from Sodom led to a period of self-imposed exile in New England. Reality set in, exposing the mess leftover from ten years of partying. He was unhappy and had a drug habit.

Like a prodigal son, Harrison returned to the Christian faith of his childhood and his journalistic roots. He left his 1,500-square-foot loft for cramped quarters and cockroaches aboard the Anastasis, a floating hospital ship that is part of Mercy Ships, a fleet serving Africa and the Americas since

1978. Working as a volunteer photographer, Harrison took thousands of haunting shots of Africans with conditions and deformities eradicated in the West thanks to modern medicine. He documented his experience on his website, www.onamercyship.com. The experience impacted him so much that upon returning to New York last July, he turned his work into a mixed media exhibition at the Metropolitan Pavilion and held a gala that raised over \$90,000 for Mercy Ships. He organized the event in under a month, thanks to Harrison's connections from his party-planning days.

The photographs moved Pavilion owner, Alan Boss, to the point of donating gallery space for free.

"Well, it's hard to look at," Boss said. "People that have less fortitude can't take it, but I think that any responsible human being with feelings has to look at it and has to take some kind of proactive steps to help. They tugged heavily at my heart and it wasn't a hard decision to donate to this

worthwhile cause.” Harrison’s Rolodex also impressed Mercy Ship’s vice-president of communication, Glenn Price.

“We’ve had a lot of volunteer photographers, but Scott’s actually the first one who’s been so well-connected with this network of relationships,” he said. “Actually, it’s the first time we’ve done something like this. We typically introduce the public to our work when our ships are done with our medical outreach. They come back to the States to resupply for procurement materials, medical equipment, and to pick up volunteers. And we’ll have a public relations phase where we open the ships for tours. But this is a much more economical way of introducing people to Mercy Ships’ work without having to visit the ship.”

Before returning to Africa for a second tour of duty in October, Harrison chatted with Good News about his life before Mercy, living on the ship, and the exhibit, which he plans to show nationally when he returns. The phone interviews took place over three days, leading up to his 30th birthday. Harrison sounded upbeat and was surprisingly honest and reflective about his life, though he was always quick to deflect the focus to the people he photographed.

“When people ask how these photos got taken, I’m happy to tell [my story], but it was never really about me,” he said. “These people are our heroes. They’re courageous, amazing people. So it was an honor to tell their stories.”

Q. How have people reacted to the exhibition?

A. It’s been amazing. To be quite honest with you, initially, success for me was filling a room with 1,000 people. I mean, it’s what I used to do, so I’ve had to learn to be

content with 150. However, people leave weeping. People are deeply affected. And that’s gotten me to realize that all it takes is one or two people to be really affected by the work or even change their lives. It’s not even about writing a check as much as it’s about people changing the course of their lives to serve the poor.

Q. Did you plan to exhibit your work before you left for Africa?

A. Not in the least bit. I flew back to New York, and within a few hours I was talking with a friend, an Andy Warhol dealer. We were at Soho House, having \$16 margaritas. This was a culture shock. In Liberia, \$16 buys a bag of rice that can feed a family of four for one month. So basically, I was with my friend and he offered me his gallery, which is a little smaller [than the Metropolitan Pavilion], about 3,000 square feet. That got me thinking of actually doing something with my photos on the first day back. Then another friend of mine from the nightlife saw the images and was deeply moved and called the people he knew at the Metropolitan Pavilion, which is 8,000 square feet. I was able to present the images to them and they agreed to give me \$75,000 of space for free. They normally charge five grand a day.

Q. During your ten years of partying, did you think at any point, maybe this isn’t what you should be doing?

A. You know, I gotta say I never lost my faith. It was just a matter of obedience. I wanted to be promiscuous; I wanted to do drugs. It was a just streak of rebellion. All the stuff that I was told I couldn’t do, I wanted to do. It was a sort of battle.



(left) The hospital ship Anastasis became temporary home for Scott Harrison. (below) Scott shows the digital images on the back screen of his camera to a group of children.



I just pushed my conscience and God completely aside. And then, you know, I guess he just got me back ten years later. I took some time out of the city and got some perspective on my life and I realized that I was really unhappy and that I had just degenerated in some ways. I mean, what I did for a living was basically allowing people to escape their lives and get drunk. And the better I was at that, the more people I got to do that. I was living very selfishly. So the idea with Mercy Ships was to tithe a year of the last ten, do a 180, go the opposite direction, and serve others and minister to people.

Q. How did your family and friends react?

A. My family was very supportive. I don't think my friends understood it, but I mean, c'mon, I'd joined a humanitarian organization of doctors. It wasn't exactly low profile, you know? I was hanging out with a bunch of surgeons that are in the poorest countries in the world operating for free, so I think they enjoyed living vicariously through me. [After Hurricane Katrina] everyone was asking me where they should donate money.

Q. What made you choose Mercy over other organizations, like the Peace Corps?

A. For me, being a Peace Corps worker was never an option. I wanted to have maximum impact. Peace Corps workers that I had met lived in villages with six people and three goats, and that's not my person-

(above) Alfred's condition disfigured his appearance and became dangerous as it worsened. (bottom) Alfred's mother brought him to be examined aboard the Anastasis and his condition was deemed operable. (right) Post-op Alfred gives a thumbs-up.

All photos courtesy of Scott Harrison

(right) Alfred's family were doubly frustrated because neither the medical expertise nor the money to pay for such help was available to them. (right-below) Whenever the ship is in port, crowds gather seeking medical help.

ality. But surgeons changing faces and saving people from suffocating to death—the stakes were so high. That's what attracted me. The results were evident. Someone comes in and looks completely different after eight hours of surgery.

Q. What was living on the ship like?

A. I went from feeling like a king in New York to feeling like a pauper with two roommates and bunk beds and cockroaches. And we're eating Chef Boyardee every day. Then I got out into the villages and I started meeting people and photographing patients who were coming to the ship and immediately I'm like a king because I took a shower that day, I have three meals, and I have a bed. So it was a real prince-to-pauper-to-prince-again experience. I was grateful to be living on the ship and to have so much.

Q. Tell me about Alfred, one of the children you photographed. By reading your blog, it seems meeting him was a highlight of your experience.

A. At the time, Alfred was 15 years old with a five-pound tumor coming out of his face. I'd never seen anything like that before and it was difficult. Also, I hadn't seen any of the "afters." It was my first day there and I couldn't see ahead to Alfred going home after surgery.

Q. How's he doing now?

A. Now he's back in school. He hadn't been in school for a couple of years and I offered to put him through college. If we go back to Benin, I'll certainly visit him. I hope to continue the relationship with him.

Q. Why do you think there aren't more people doing work like this?



A. It's hard to do it. It's hard to leave a life of having. It's the unknown, the uncertainty. Our lives become very comfortable and we build ties. Whether it's ties to money or relationships, it's hard to leave and make the sacrifice for something that's unknown. I think more people should, though. It's incredibly rewarding.

Q. What are you going to do when you return to the United States?

A. I'd love to write a book about Dr. Gary Parker, our chief medical officer. That would be a way to spread the word about Mercy Ships. Maybe take this exhibit on the road. I mean, what's a year? I turn 30 at midnight. I have no plans. I'm going back to Liberia to shoot patient screenings. There's a lot of stuff I missed when I put the show together and there's a couple more stories I need to tell. I need some time off, some time to process. I haven't read a book in four months. I'll catch up on TV and movies. I just need to process it all, so to speak.

Fayola Shakes works for the *Sun-Sentinel* in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

For more information on Mercy Ships, visit www.mercyships.org. For more information on Scott Harrison visit www.onamercyship.com.