

# CONFESSIONS OF A RENEGADE HUMANITARIAN:

Molotov Cocktails, Lepers and a Land Rover

PART 2



Leprosy patients at the Ganta Rehab center greet our Land Rover, carrying wheelchairs and crutches.



**L**AST NEW YEAR'S EVE, I THREW A PARTY. AS AN EVENT PLANNER IN NEW YORK CITY FOR ALMOST A DECADE, NEW YEAR'S EVE WAS THE BIG EVENT. WE'D HIRE FAMOUS DJ'S, RENT INCREDIBLE VENUES AND CHARGE \$250-\$1,000 A HEAD FOR PARTIES.

Masses would stand in line to pay for a night of champagne and partying. Sometimes we'd even flee the city and the Times Square madness for beaches in South America, and let the party run without us. Yet this year, my celebration couldn't be more different—and neither could my lifestyle.

This New Year's, I was headed to a leper colony in Liberia, to spend the evening surrounded by those living in extreme poverty. Instead of chatting with models and celebrities, I'd be surrounded by cripples in wheelchairs and on crutches.

On New Year's Eve, I paid my fourth visit to the Ganta "Rehab" leper colony in Liberia, West Africa, a haven for more than 700 lepers and those cured of the disease, but still debilitated or crippled by its effects.

## A LEPER NEW YEAR

I first heard about the leper colony last year when, as a volunteer photographer, I flew with a medical team on a United Nations helicopter to Ganta, a town in Liberia's north on the border with Guinea. I was enchanted by the place during a short visit and returned a month later to live among the people there, photographing and documenting their remarkable lives.

Almost a year and a half ago, I traded my world of fashion models, parties and jet-setting for the world of the Anastasis, a 52-year-old, 550-foot hospital ship that's docked in what's presently considered the world's poorest country, Liberia. The drastic change started in the heart, as I did some soul-searching and realized that I needed to serve people less fortunate than me. So I flew to Africa, joining Mercy Ships as their volunteer photographer and writer.

I am a volunteer in the most extreme sense of the word, as those who volunteer with the organization actually pay \$500 a month for the privilege of doing so. This helps keep money flowing where it's most needed. We do free dramatic life-changing surgeries onboard the ship, and in a country where there's no public electricity or running water, and only one doctor per 50,000 people, we are constantly overwhelmed with patients in need.

On trip number four to the leper colony in Ganta, I had a New Year's surprise for the residents in the back of my Land Rover.

Lafe Wood, a friend who hails from Colorado and the ship's well-digger, joined me on the dock at dawn as we began the long journey over dreadful roads to the colony. I drove Defender #214, which I hoped could carry us safely more than 550 miles. In the back I had loaded a projector, speakers and screen.

Photographers in Africa and other remote parts of the world rarely are able to give back to their subjects. They show their images and tell their stories of poverty to the western world, all with good intentions—but so often those photographed are left out of the loop. So after snapping more than a thousand intimate shots of Ganta residents while I lived with them, I decided to drive back and put on a show for them.

The photos I'd captured were, to me, a celebration of their spirit, a tribute to their courage as they fought this destructive disease. And both the disease and the colony continued to intrigue me.

*The Ducor Intercontinental Hotel sits at the highest point of Monrovia, Liberia's oceanfront capital. It catered to luxury business travelers and vacationers before the war. Today, it is home to more than 5,000 squatters who live without electricity or running water.*

## THE COLONY, REHAB

Just after 2 PM, Lafe and I pulled into Rehab. I was greeted enthusiastically by many of the patients, who'd been tipped off about my coming by the five nuns who run the colony. I gave Lafe, a tour of the facilities, and he was as impressed as I had been to learn just how self-sufficient this crippled community has become under the steady direction of the Catholic sisters.

Wilfred gave us the tour, clad in a pink hand-me-down sweatshirt that read, "I have PMS and a handgun." We joked together about the shirt as he proudly led us down to the eight large hand-dug fishponds where they "grew"

fish. We passed beehives closer than we should have and met Mohammed, who stood in the doorway of a building, machete in hand. I invited him to the screening that would take place later than night at the hospital complex, snapped his picture, and promised to include it. We toured the building that housed about fifty chickens, and the keeper proudly showed us eggs laid only moments before. The piggery stalls

held more than 45 pigs, which loudly squealed and jumped against the walls of their pens to greet us. Rehab is expansive. More than 56 buildings sprawl across 100 impossibly green acres, and patients dot the landscape. Most use crutches, walkers and wheelchairs to get around, but all seem to possess the same intoxicating spirit of hope and optimism. Calls of "How's the body?" or "Day-O!" ring out, typical Liberian greetings.



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## LEPROSY

One of the world's oldest and most feared diseases, leprosy is the stuff of myth and legend. Most westerners know little about it because only 150 of the world's 600,000 new cases each year appear in the U.S. Today, the term "leprosy" has been replaced with the title "Hansen's disease," after Norwegian doctor Armauer Hansen, who was the first to view the bacteria under a microscope in 1873.

Doctors believe the disease can be transmitted when people cough and sneeze, discharging bacilli similar to those of tuberculosis on droplets or dust particles that are inhaled. They seem to agree that 95 percent of people have a natural immunity to the germ, and that even the susceptible 5 percent would have a tough time catching leprosy with healthy immune systems.

For those infected, a drug cocktail can kill the pathogen and lead to a 6- to 12-month total cure today, whereas treatments lasted years just a generation ago. Experts believe the only real obstacle to ridding the world of the disease, which is rarely fatal, is the reluctance or inability of many cultures to diagnose it before the body is ravaged.

I was surprised to learn leprosy is not a flesh-eating disease. Instead, leprosy attacks nerve endings as the bacteria migrates to the cooler spots on the body—the hands, feet, eyes, ears and nose. Once there it does its dirty work, stealing the body's ability to feel pain. Most of the disfigurement associated with leprosy is caused by this anesthetic effect, as if the hands and feet were shot full of a permanent supply of Novocain.

Sufferers injure themselves repeatedly and unknowingly because they



*ABOVE: A Mercy Ships Defender parked outside the Anastasis hospital ship in Monrovia's port. RIGHT: A broken gas pump serves as a reminder of better days. Gas is now poured from glass jars. LEFT: Perit il ut am volobore velenis nullam vulnam velismodolor senibh et augait nonsectem nos at, quat. Oloreet ipit prat wisl incil iniamcon henibh ex ex et volore mod te*

can't feel pain. The disease also can produce clawed hands, collapsed noses and unsightly lesions—deformities that can remain even after a patient is "cured."

I had been extremely fortunate to be able to arrange for the free surgery of seven patients from the colony. They were operated on by South African surgeon Dr. Tertius Venter, who is incredibly skilled in repairing damaged hands. He and I had corresponded via email, and he enthusiastically agreed to operate on the lepers' clawed hands during his two-week visit to the ship. I was eager to see those patients again and know how their hands were healing.

“The faces in the show were the faces of survivors, of courage, of hope and joy.”



### THE SHOW

At nightfall, Rehab residents started to congregate at the hospital center. Wheelchairs formed a cluster, and the children sat on the ground. I jumped on a rickety table and tried unsuccessfully to tape the white sheet I'd brought to the outside of the clinic wall. It kept falling and taking paint with it, so I switched to medical gauze, which did the trick.

Once I realized that the outlets powered by the generator only had two-prong inputs, a scramble ensued for adaptors. Sister Gaudi finally produced one, and we were in business, running an extension cord to the projector and laptop perched on the Rover's hood.

Lafe had climbed on the Defender's roof with his guitar, and had been strumming softly for the waiting crowd. The system all hooked up now, it was time to run the show. I hit play, and the images and music rolled.

I smiled when I saw the picture of Bubba James. It's my favorite, and for me, it embodies the spirit of Rehab. Earlier in the afternoon, before the show, Bubba had been sitting in his wheelchair as I approached. He grinned when he saw me, and I was glad to be remembered. Neither he nor his friends are sure of his age, although he looks like he's pushing 80 and is scarecrow-thin.



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Half his fingers are missing, and he wears bright red wool stockings over stumps that end above where his feet should be. He tells a story about the night a rat ate his foot while he slept, and grins at the end of his tale. Another portrait is of Francis Neufville, who tells of the times war entered the colony—of rocket blasts and random bullets ripping into the houses. Francis also speaks with evident affection and pride of a Sister Murphy, one of the nuns who used to help run the colony. Francis remembers it all and grins as he weaves a basket that has been two weeks in the making. He's confident he'll be able to sell it for \$5, enough to buy some soap and spices. Francis has one leg, and his good fingers are wrapped with cloth to prevent further injury as he handles a sewing needle fashioned from a broken umbrella.

The show lasted an hour and featured 142 images. I had a great view of the audience from Rover rooftop, and I was surprised at their response. Cheering, shouting and pointing, they were enthralled by their own portraits. I got choked up at one point during the show, as I saw the emotion on the faces of the nuns. It struck me just how important the lives of these people were to the sisters.

The faces in the show were the faces of survivors, of courage, of hope and joy.

### NEW YEAR'S DAY, MOUNT NIMBA

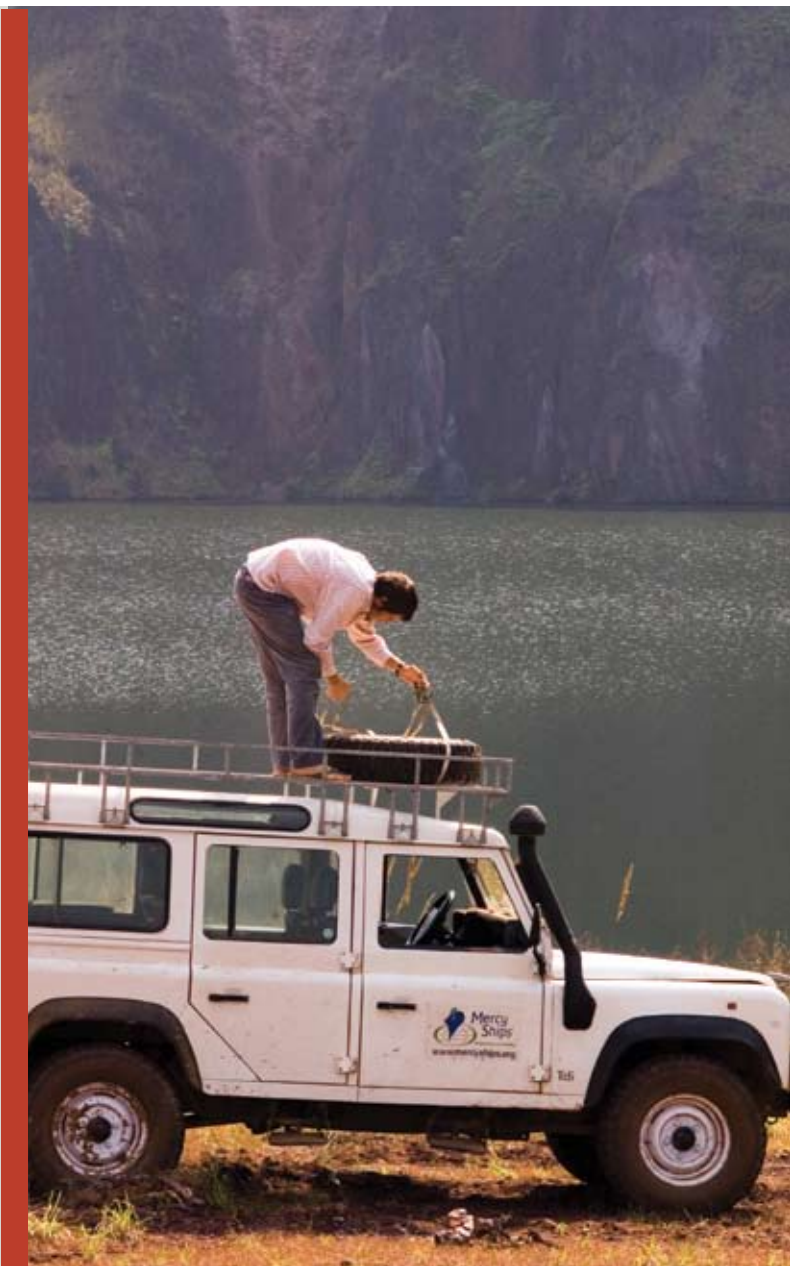
Lafe and I were sad to leave them all early the next morning, but we also were excited to reach Liberia's highest point, Mount Nimba. We left just after dawn and traveled two hours over steadily worsening roads to Yekepa, a town that hosts the border of three countries. As we pulled up to the crossroads of Guinea, Ivory Coast and Liberia, a man drinking a soda and wearing a tattered immigration shirt walked up to meet us. We made small talk, then drove away.

The mountain was beautiful. It's about a mile high, solid iron ore, reportedly the highest-grade iron deposit in the world. Iron ore mining on Mount Nimba once accounted for approximately 1 per cent of the world production, and in the 60's, 70's and 80's, Mount Nimba ore was the first iron ore produced in Africa. The civil war chased the miners out, and the behemoth heavy machinery was left behind. It lies everywhere, broken and rusty, lending an apocalyptic feel to the serene landscape.

Halfway up the mountain, we parked the Rover and looked down upon a huge lake. Two large boa constrictors were sunning, but we drove down anyway and jumped in for a swim at the other side.

We spent a few hours swimming, climbing the machinery and photographing the landscape, and then headed back towards Monrovia. Two flat tires and eight hours later, we reached the ship.

We were covered in dust and dirt, hungry and tired. But we were thankful, realizing just how fortunate we were to enjoy such a special start to 2006.



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