



JUNE 2002

# Life Boat

Disfigured and deformed, these lost souls have one last chance: Dr. Gary Parker

By JOHN DYSON

**A** SLIM, RANGY FIGURE with short-cut hair and three gold bars on the shoulder-tabs of his white shirt pauses on the gangway of the *Anastasis*. He gazes for a moment at the cluttered, chaotic, dilapidated port of Cotonou, in which the old liner,



**Checkup-** Dr. Parker looks at Africa and sees people in need of healing.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
ANTONIN KRATOCHVIL/VII





**Safe Harbor**—Once the floating hospital docks, people—over 4 million in 41 countries so far—start climbing the gangway for medical care.

now a hospital ship, gleams like a white water bird in the hot West African sunshine. He takes a deep breath and braces himself for the tough job ahead.

Dr. Gary Parker goes ashore and drives to a nearby sports arena. Outside some 3000 sad, suffering people are standing, sitting, lying in the steamy equatorial heat. Waiting. For him. These are the lost souls of Africa—disfigured by disease, accident or birth deformities. The oral and maxillofacial surgeon may be their last hope.

ANGELLE KOFFI cooked meals to sell by the roadside. But her customers were few. People thought she

was cursed, and they turned away from her. A tumor as large as a mango grew out of Angelle's cheek, stretching her nose sideways and twisting her mouth. It invaded her throat so that she had to struggle to breathe.

Shunned even by her relatives whose compound she shared, the 24-year-old orphan slept in an isolated hut. On the street, people ran at the sight of her so she often came out only at night, her head covered by a shawl. Sometimes she prayed for death to release her from the agony and ridicule.

Only at church did she find some hope—and one day in September 2000 a visitor brought exciting news.

"The white ship is coming!" It was a chance she could be healed.

ONCE IN THE STADIUM, Parker begins examining a long line of people pre-selected from the thousands outside as good prospects for surgery. He tries not to let their pleading eyes affect his judgment, but their plight weighs on his heart. The UCLA-trained surgeon still has to turn away one in three because they have advanced forms of TB, AIDS, anemia or other diseases. They are too weak to survive an operation. His refusal likely means a death sentence.

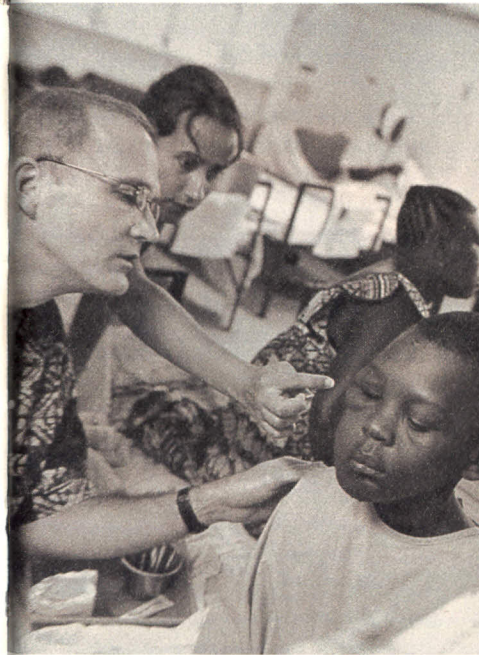
Near the end of the day, a slim woman with a bowed head ap-

proaches him with a shawl covering her face. Parker, who has seen every kind of disfigurement, tenderly folds back the cloth. The face turned up to him is hideous, distorted by a massive tumor. But it is operable. And he selects her for surgery.

**M**ERCY SHIPS grew from a dream Don Stephens had as a 19-year-old Colorado farm boy. He was volunteering for Youth With a Mission in the Bahamas and saw illness claim lives that could have been saved with simple modern medicine.

In 1978, now a regional director for the organization in Switzerland, Stephens raised \$1 million to buy a 522-foot, nine-deck Italian liner retired from the Far East run. With a volunteer crew recruited from churches, he and his wife spent three years converting the ship in Greece, renamed her *Anastasis* (Greek for resurrection) and sailed to Los Angeles. From there, they made disaster-relief voyages around the Pacific. Soon Stephens had launched a fleet of hospital ships.

Gary Parker learned about the organization in 1984 and volunteered to help. He had grown up in Los Angeles, the son of an aeronautical engineer, and had trained in dentistry and oral surgery. Motivated by a strong Christian faith, Parker was determined to help poor people. A devastating earthquake in Mexico in 1986 gave him the opportunity, and he took a plane down to assist





Mercy Ships with the relief effort.

Parker expected to meet a team of fellow surgeons. Instead, he found himself working alone with a waiting room full of despairing people with facial deformities, most of them children. He planned on spending three months—15 years later he's still on board.

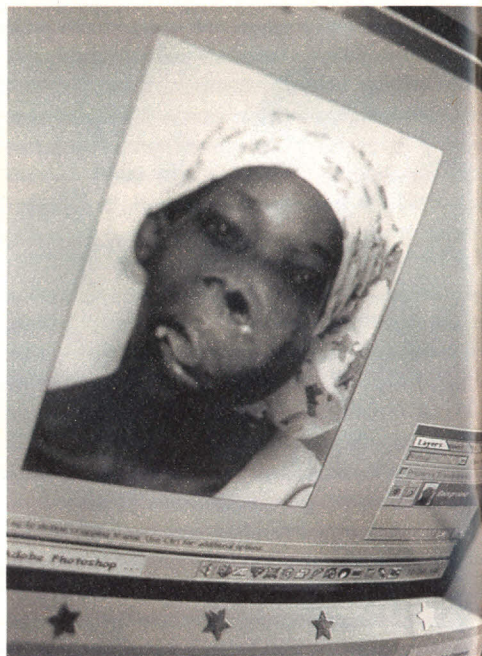
The ship was the answer to Parker's dream to help the poor. It could carry vital medical equipment to ports in countries without adequate facilities. He'd never run short of demand for his skills. But there were personal sacrifices.

Practicing in Los Angeles, Parker could have earned a handsome income. Instead, he survives by raising funds from church groups and friends, paying \$630 a month to live on board the *Anastasis* with his wife, Susan, and two small children. That has been more rewarding. "Our friends say we're crazy, but happiness is not just a lucrative salary," he says. "Here I'm changing lives, and there's nobody else to do it. At home, I'd only be changing appearances."

Most charities would do well to spend 40 percent or less of total expenses on administration and fundraising. In 2000 Mercy Ships spent only 22 percent on these items. Heroic operations that would run thousands in the United States are done for a fraction of the cost. Though the fleet receives no government funding, it operates on a shoestring because nobody is paid. Moreover, all crew members—captain, cooks,

nurses, teachers, even founder Stephens himself—must pay for food and lodging to work on the ship.

**D**URING THE *Anastasis*'s seven-month stay in Cotonou, Parker and his team did up to eight cataract surgeries a day, performing 471 eye operations and 929 other surgical procedures. Three thousand more people had dental work; 5000 were treated at village clinics reached by a convoy of white Land Rovers ferrying health workers. A construction crew built a community center with grain stores and a maternity clinic. On weekends, a group of



**Always On Call**—Parker spends up to 12 hours a day rotating among the *Anastasis*'s three small operating rooms.

women and children spent their free time painting the inside of a jail and visiting orphans.

As the ship's chief medical officer, Parker operates up to 12 hours a day, keeping three OR's going with a succession of volunteer surgeons, anesthesiologists and many other medical specialists, who come for a few weeks at a time. Every operation changes somebody's life: An infant with food bubbling out of a gaping cleft in its palate. A silent herdsman who'd survived for 30 years by rubbing liquid porridge between his teeth because he couldn't open his mouth. A new nose for an old woman with only a hole where her nose should have been, the re-

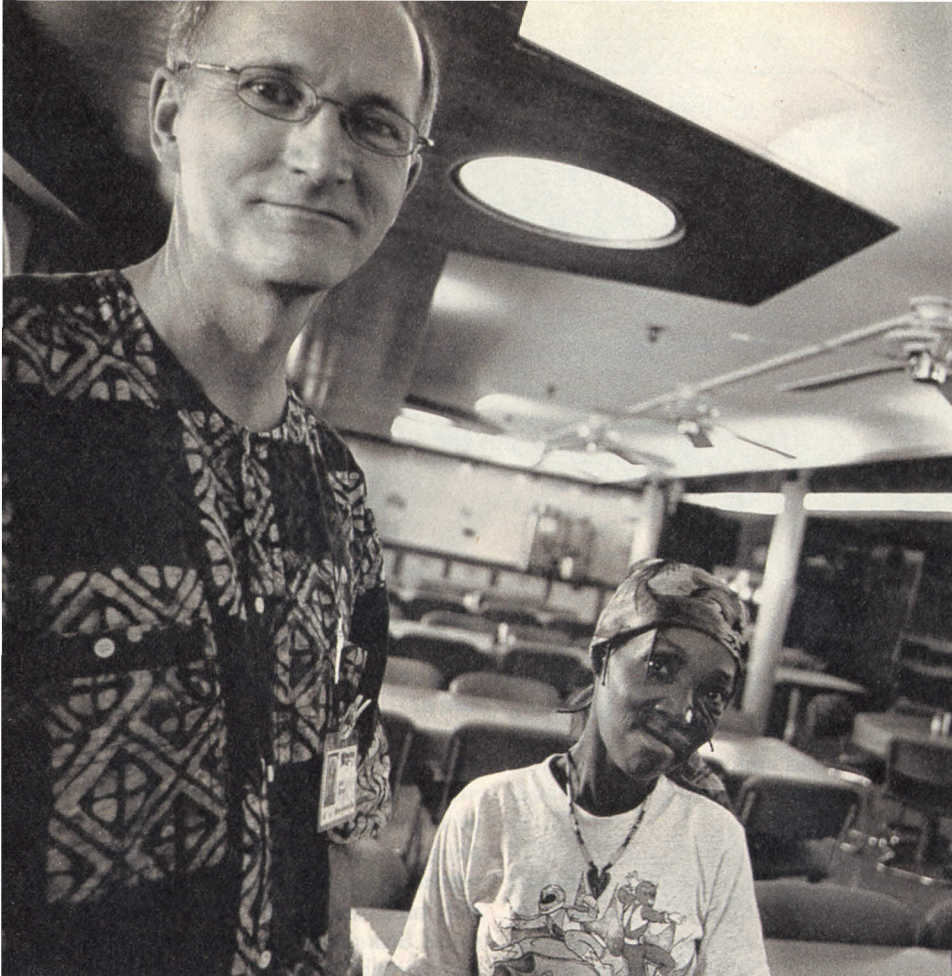
sult of a gangrene-like infection.

As CEO, Parker is also involved in the quest for fuel, the endless struggle against burst pipes and cockroaches, being diplomatic with officials onshore, and looking after the ship's 363 crew members from 39 countries, all volunteers like himself.

His family is quartered in two linked cabins on the upper deck. At mealtimes, Susan gets their food from the communal dining room, then serves it at their own table. The children go to school on the aft-deck, where the play space is enclosed in nets. "For us, a perfect holiday is a suburban house with a big garden and clean grass," says Susan.

As nobody is paid, a "can do"





**Satisfaction**—Parker knows that changing a person's appearance can change her life. After years of ridicule, Angelle Koffi can smile.

spirit pervades the ship. Everybody does their bit and a bit more. Nurses take turns cleaning up the engine room and accountants dish out food. When the "all hands on deck" call goes out to help load cargo, Parker is among the volunteers. The crew is a walking blood bank: When

blood is required, people volunteer on the spot.

**FEARFULLY PEERING** around the shawl hiding her bulging face, Angelle picked her way past the ship's high school kids playing basketball on the dock. The day had come for her

surgery. "Welcome to the white ship," a nurse said, taking her hand.

Her doctor was to be the tall man who had selected her from the crowd. She trusted him for the grueling operation, which was to take ten hours.

When Angelle awoke she was fearful. Her face felt stiff and heavy. Had the operation failed? A nurse came and put a mirror in her hand. Nervously she lifted the glass: There were bandages, stitches and enormous swelling. But there was no tumor.

All day she inspected her face, wincing as she flexed her new smile. When Parker came to visit, she took his hand in both of hers. "I can give you nothing but my thanks," she said through an interpreter, and her lopsided grin lit up the ship.

**ONE DAY** in March 2001, a confident young woman walked gracefully down the gangway. In the pocket of her blue frock, a document explained why the picture on her ID card no longer matched her face. When she

got home, nobody recoiled from her. The pastor embraced her, whirling her round. "Angelle, you are beautiful now!" he said.

**BEFORE THE *Anastasis*** ended its stay in Cotonou, advance parties were already arranging for the ship's next stops in Sierra Leone and Gambia. So far, Mercy Ships has sent vessels to nearly 70 ports in 41 countries, giving medical and practical help to almost four million people since 1986. Currently, 14 nations, from Nigeria to the Philippines, are pleading for a Mercy Ship to call.

One day not long before departing, Gary Parker was deftly sewing up an infant's cleft palate when a nurse told him about Angelle's welcome at home. "That's why we're in business," he said, smiling broadly. "Angelle has got her life back."

Now Angelle can smile too.

*For more information on Mercy Ships, visit [mercyships.org](http://mercyships.org).*

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A partial list of actual trademarks for which McDonald's has applied; not all have been granted:

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McGreen	McMillions

—Harper's Magazine