



Stories from the Hospital Slice of TLC

A sidelight of The Luke Commission medical endeavors out in the bush takes place right inside the city of Manzini.

It's a small but stirring slice of the whole TLC pie.

During two months every year, TLC team members regularly visit the maternity and pediatrics wards of Raleigh -Fitkin Memorial Hospital. Usually, those team members include the VanderWal boys and their Tuinstra grandparents, accompanied by various guests and volunteers.

The boys, now 9 and 6, take turns going to the hospital. "I like to see the babies," said younger brother Zion. "I like giving out toys," added Jacob, one of the triplets.

It's a privilege beyond compare to visit women who have just given birth and children who smile through extreme illnesses.

TLC translator Thulani told us, "People at the hospital ask about when you are coming."

Patients like to receive gifts, of course. But they welcome our handshakes just as much..

But it's the babies and their moms who receive most of our attention - about 150 every visit.

"Remember the small kid who was all burned up? I can't believe kids like that can be happy when they're so hurt," Zebadiah recalled recently. "Remember when I filled my whole bag with bumblebees? Everybody wanted a squishy bee toy that day." Bumblebees donated by Grant Township Lions Club

The gifts we give away - brand new baby clothes, blankets, terrycloth diapers, little-girl dresses, coloring books and crayons, toys - all come from donors back home, a large quantity comes from District 1-F Lions.



This sick baby's mom gladly accepts a World Missionary Press booklet "Help from Above."



Jacob VanderWal and his grandma give this toddler a toy. Her hand-knitted hat is a gift from a The Luke Commission supporter, too.

"I may never get to see the people I sew for," said one 90-year-old lady who makes cotton baby quilts, "but this is what God wants me to do with my days."

"Want to know what keeps me going? Why I keep shopping for bolts of material on sale?" asked another woman who spends countless hours and winter months in her basement sewing wraps (skirts) for Swazi women.

"I've been to Swaziland, seen how little women have, how much they appreciate getting something new and beautiful. I know The Luke Commission cares for the most needy," she said, answering her own questions.

Therefore, on days when we're not in the bush, Lion Calvin, a grandson, and I (plus any others who get up early) load five or six stuffed bags onto our shoulders and walk to the hospital.

One morning, as we passed through the campus gate onto the gravel road, Zion said: "Watch out for cars, snakes, and thorns. Oh, and don't forget robbers."

With this realistic warning, we're on our way. Lion Calvin and I used to carry the boys' bags. Now they carry their own bags.

Zion put things into perspective as he told his grandfather: "When you get older, things like walking get harder."

Luke said he likes "to touch the cute little babies. But I really like our talks on the way to the hospital." So for a mile each way, we hear life through the mind of a 9-year-old.

The maternity ward is crowded. About 35 babies are delivered every day. It's easy to forget that these smiling mothers have just given birth. Most are dressed in street clothes and holding their new babies. A few are sleeping and obviously exhausted.

Only occasionally is a father in the ward. Sometimes a mother or sister arrives to see the new babe. More often, however, no one is there to rejoice over the new life or to care for the baby so the mom can rest.

Lion Calvin, or any other male visitor, is not viewed as an intruder but as a welcomed guest in a sea of females. But the VanderWal boys are preferred favorites.

We greet every mother, give each two gifts and a tract, and exclaim in SiSwati what a beautiful or handsome baby she has.

One new mother is badly beaten. Her face is bruised and swollen. Her eyes are black and blue, although injuries are not as noticeable at first glance on a black person as they are on a person with lighter skin.



Though medical prognoses in the hospital often are dire, hugs and smiles and gifts make the moment a joy to be cherished.



Grandpa Lion Calvin loves Swazi babies. Who wouldn't? This little one receives a new dress.

This young lady even has a boy child, the hope of Swazi women because male children are more desired than female children. Also, I suspect, women know firsthand what tough lives lay ahead for most of their little girl babies...

Some babies have died. "My baby is late," three women tell us one day. We pray with each of them. They grip our hands - and our hearts.

A mother whose baby lived only a day cries silently as we pray. How do Swazis weep without a sound? Her facial expression does not change, nor does she get red-faced like white women do when we cry. But her shoulders shake in grief.

Luke wants an explanation for all the blood beside a bed. "We'll discuss this later," we whisper. But we realize, again, how surprisingly dignified and stalwart these women handle post-birth situations which can be messy and unsightly.

In the premie ward, babies weighing as little one kilogram (2.2 pounds) are the norm. Mothers sit with them day and night, manually pumping their breasts, and then dripping the milk into tiny mouths. Most of our new donated clothes are too big for these babies, but the moms gratefully receive bonnets and blankets and sarongs.

Twenty new moms crowd into a hallway to hear a child care lecture. They sit on hard benches with no backs, holding their newborns only minutes or hours old. The babies are wrapped in layers of blankets or cloths.

It's at least 90 degrees in that hallway, and as we shake hands, perspiration drips from our brows. But Swazis think babies must sweat to grow, so no one uncovers her infant.

People are the same. Cultures are different. Understanding each other is lifelong puzzle.

Entering the pediatrics ward, we immediately notice the one and only private room is empty. That means the 10-year-old girl we visited two days ago has died.

Later that week, we meet a 12-year-old boy in the same room. His grandma (gogo) bows as we enter. The boy is so thin and sick that only his eyes move as Jacob gives him a toy truck. Gogo accepts a new sweatshirt for her grandson, as hot days turn to chilly nights.

"Thank you so much for coming to us," said a mom who spoke good English. "Thank you for not getting

tired of us." She held a 2-year-old malnourished, vacant-eyed toddler.

Often, hospital stays are long and laborious. Mothers sleep on the floor under or beside their children's beds. They wash their children's clothes by hand and hang them on bushes or a clothes line outside the ward.

Most of the illnesses are complicated by the children being HIV positive. Kids frequently fall into cooking fires, so burn injuries are numerous.



From one child to another, Zion tries to soothe a hurting little girl.



Both these siblings are hospitalized, but their mom welcomes a photo with Lion Janet and grandson Luke.

Three little children from one family share a room. Their father works in South Africa, and their mother wanted to go out for the evening. She left them alone. A kerosene container sprung a leak and ignited a flash fire.

Now this mother tends her bandaged, burned children hour after hour, day after day in the hospital. But even she smiles when Jacob hands her boy a toy motorcycle and her two girls each a dollie.

"I save the biggest toys for the biggest kids," Jacob noted. "But these little ones need my best stuff."

Turning to leave, the Holy Spirit prompts us to step behind a faded curtain. Here we meet a young pregnant mother whose 2-year-old child has just passed away. The little body is covered with a baby blanket we gave her a few days earlier.

She is crying. No one is there to comfort her or share her sorrow, but Jesus is... We sit with her for a few minutes staring at the tiny mound. She accepts our wordless hugs and a SiSwati New Testament.

We would like to know her story, but language differences hinder us. (Oh, that will be the day in heaven when we all speak the same, new language.)

On a walk home, Luke reminds me that I need to pack more gifts. "Good thing I had extra toys, when you ran out of clothes," he said.

Later, preparing for our next hospital visit, I try to remember ages and sexes of those in the pediatrics ward and to estimate how many new babies will be born. I marvel at how God guides my hands and my thoughts as I fill those bags. It's beyond human planning and execution, for no one is ever left out.

Early one morning, Zion runs up to me, hands in a gesture of immediacy and urgency, declaring: "Grandma, we have no time to waste!"

As we see lives slip away in Swaziland and know our days are numbered wherever we are, whether in the bush or a city hospital, we see Truth shine bright.

Thank you for donating your time and money and abilities. Indeed, we have no time to waste!

Lion Janet Tuinstra for Lions Harry and Echo, the boys, & TLC team



Zebadiah loves to feel the soft skin of newborns, "especially their cheeks," he said. This young mother is being released after a 24-hour hospital stay.

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