

When my name was chosen at Convention for the Operation Smile mission it felt very *surreal*. I have heard people use (and overuse) that word, but I don't think I knew what it meant until that very moment. I had seven team members in that drawing, and I was sitting in my chair and praying that one of their names would be drawn. It took me a minute to register my own name when it was read! So how did I respond? I cried. And then I sobbed. And then, I cried some more. Right there on stage for everyone to see. But it truly is a moment I will never forget!

Some time back, Bill and Kathy Magee spoke at our Convention. I fell in love with Operation Smile, and I respect every little thing the organization and volunteers do to help children and adults that so desperately need it. It has been a dream for me to go on an Operation Smile mission.

After about 21 hours of travel time and layovers, our team from Close To My Heart arrived in Bolivia. What a journey! It was so exciting to be heading to a place where we knew that we were needed. We went on the Bolivian mission as non-medical volunteers, and there was just so much to do! Once we arrived at the hospital, we helped set up a child life area for the kids to play while they were waiting to be seen. It was shocking to me to see all the people waiting with their children, and then I realized again how great the need is for our donations. I did not expect to see the hundreds of people waiting. If it was overwhelming to me, imagine how overwhelming it was to them! Even though it was crowded, there were smiling children everywhere. I brought an Instax camera to take pictures, and the children loved getting their little faces in print!



The time I spent hugging babies and children was priceless. I don't have the opportunity to rock little ones very often, so it was a *great joy* for me to relieve a mama's arms. Some of those people had long trips to the hospital and had been waiting and holding their babies for hours.

I met a very special little boy, Ian Lucas. He was 6 months old at that time, and his mama showed me that day what strength and character are. She had been at the hospital since early morning, and she carried him, all his blankets, diaper bags, and coats. All the children had to go through ten different

areas for screening, and I followed Ian through those areas. Much of the time I couldn't understand what was being said, but thanks to Monica and Google translate, we were able to talk a little bit. The ten areas helped determine whether they were able to have surgery, and I was so happy to hear he was healthy and had been chosen!

On surgery day, I was able to sit with Ian and Mama during nutritional counseling and pre-surgery. This was a very hard time for Mama, and I am so glad it reassured her knowing I would be in surgery with Lucas. What an incredible experience! To be able to stand next to the surgeons as they performed this life-changing surgery was not only miraculous, but it was humbling. These doctors, nurses, and all the supporting staff are volunteers and they worked tirelessly to care for all of the children.

On the day we went home, the sun was rising over Santa Cruz, and I found myself contemplating all that we had experienced. I knew that this experience changed me and the way I think about things. I think the thing I learned that was most valuable is to always be ready with a smile. That sounds simple, but it is powerful. Mother Teresa said, "We shall never know all the good that a simple smile can do." Even when their smiles weren't perfect, these children showed so much love and shared so many smiles. They spread goodness. Our smiles are so precious, and we need to share them freely.