

Pediatric care is at the heart of Gift of Life NEO

By CYNTHIA SCHUSTER EAKIN

It takes a big heart to travel thousands of miles to help someone with a tiny, damaged one.

Gift of Life Northeast Ohio (NEO) began by providing lifesaving open heart surgery for children from around the world at Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital in Cleveland in 2003. The organization has partnered with Northeast Ohio Rotary, Rotary Clubs International and other nonprofit groups to support medical training trips for children's heart surgery teams.

"Since our first child, 12-week-old Jouseff from Cairo, we have brought in more than 60 children from the developing world for life-saving open heart surgery in Northeast Ohio," Ken Fogle, chairman of Gift of Life NEO, Inc. said. "Gift of Life NEO has saved the lives of more than an additional 1,500 children by sponsoring outbound medical training trips to regions of the developing world. Our work includes participation in more than 15 countries in Central America, the Caribbean and Africa. We have worked with Gift of Life International and Med Wish International to help equip and support the establishment of Children's Heart Surgery Centers in Assiut University in Egypt, Mater Hospital in Nairobi, Kenya, and Hospital Salud Integral in Nicaragua."

There are now 80 Gift of Life organizations around the world, according to Fogle. "By partnering with all of these different groups, we have done so much more than we thought we could do," he added.

Currently, Gift of Life NEO is concentrating its efforts in Haiti. "In January, 2010, Dr. Jeff Kempf at Akron's Children's Hospital found out about Gift of Life NEO and asked if we could help. They were bringing in a couple of kids from Haiti who needed heart surgery," Fogle said. "They have a strong relationship with St. Damien's Hospital in Port-au-Prince. St. Damien's became the triage center in Haiti after the big earthquake hit."

Dr. Jeff Kempf explained the connection between Akron Children's Hospital, St. Damien's Hospital and Gift of Life NEO. "Sr. Judy Dohner works at St. Damien's Hospital and her brother-in-law works in the emergency department at Akron Children's Hospital. She told him that they really needed help after the earthquake and he asked me if I wanted to go there. The two of us ventured to Haiti a month and a half after the earthquake and spent several weeks there. That is when we realized that there is great potential to do work in Haiti. Shortly after that, we signed a formal agreement to cooperate with St. Damien's," he said.

"Sr. Dohner suggested that I check to see if there is a Gift of Life organization in Northeast Ohio. She had been trying to get Gift of Life into St. Damien's," Kempf noted. "I called Gift of Life International and they gave me Ken Fogle's name."

"We have done 50 pediatric heart surgeries in cooperation with St. Damien's. This year, we plan to do 40 more. And, it's all because of the incredible Gift of Life organization," Kempf said. "We really do have the potential to change the world."

Three to four surgical teams go to Haiti each year to teach the Haitians to take on more of a role in pediatric heart surgery. "Our goal is to develop a self-sustaining program for children over time and to develop a supportive Haitian-run system where they can take care of their own children," Kempf added. "Our teams work shoulder to shoulder, side



A father comforts his daughter after her cardiac surgery.



Photographs by Ted Stevens Dr. John Pope, intensivist, talks with surgeon Francesco Santoro.

by side. Our relationship goes back and forth."

In addition to sending medical personnel to Haiti, members of the Haitian team are brought to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at Akron Children's Hospital for training, with the support of Gift of Life NEO.

"We now have a doctor from Haiti training to be the first pediatric cardiologist in the country," Kempf noted. "She will change the face of pediatric cardiology in the entire country."

"Our last grant was over \$100,000," Ken Fogle added. "Our goal is to work ourselves out of work."

Visit golneo.org for more information about Gift of Life NEO and the work that they are doing in Haiti and around the world.

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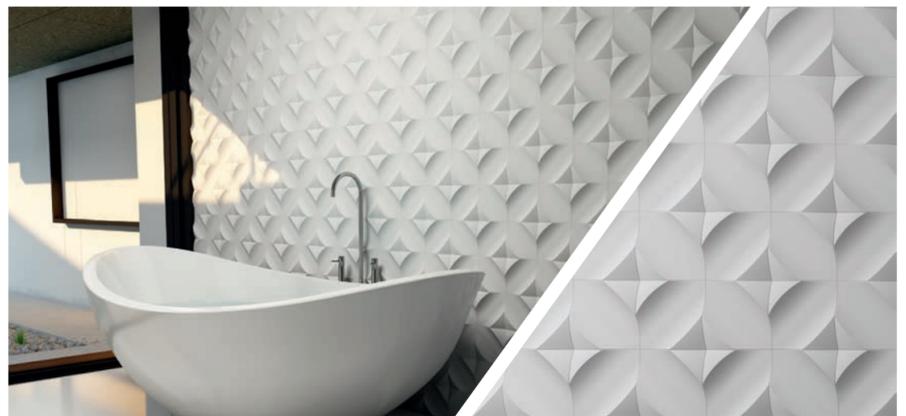


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