



KAREN SCHIELY/Akron Beacon Journal

At left, child life specialist Michelle Peterson puts an anesthesia mask over interpreter Denso Gay's mouth and nose to show Elie Pierre (left), held by hospital medical photographer Ted Stevens, and Kurtis Petion how the mask will be placed on them. Below, pediatric cardiac surgeons Dr. Michael Spector (left) and Dr. Philip Smith perform open heart surgery on 16-month-old Kurtis Petion.



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Heart

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from around the globe to the United States for heart surgery that isn't possible in their homeland. Participating hospitals receive token payments from Gift of Life to provide the operations at a steep discount.

To make the journey possible, Kempf and his wife, Ellen — both physicians at Children's Hospital — opened their Fairlawn home and their hearts.

The couple agreed to serve as surrogate parents, hosting the boys and Gay, who accompanied the children to America as their interpreter and legal guardian. Because of government rules, the Haitian parents weren't permitted to come.

"Many people came together to love and care for those kids," Jeff Kempf said.

Boys embrace America

Things like the sounds of English, the sight of snowflakes and squirrels and the smells of McDonald's burgers and fries were foreign to Elie and Kurtis.

But within a day after arriving in the Kempfs' spacious house, Elie had made himself right at home.

"Mmmmm," he announced when given a doughnut his first morning in America. "Merci."

Though he speaks Haitian Creole, a language similar to French, Elie immediately began parroting the English words he heard all around him.

Cell phones, in particular, became his favorite tool to try out his new language skills.

"Hello, Dr. Jeff," Elie said into any cell phone that he could find.

The Kempfs know basic Creole phrases — enough to say "hello," "goodbye" and ask whether the boys are hungry or in pain.

For more complex conversations, Gay was there to translate between the Kempfs and the boys.

Gay also sent regular updates via email to the social workers at St. Damien Hospital, who shared the messages with the parents.

Kurtis, the younger of the two boys, was just 16 months old when he arrived.

For several nights, Jeff Kempf ended up snuggling with the toddler, who slept in a crib or on one of the two mattresses the couple had set up in the boys' temporary room.

"He just needs somebody to hold him," Jeff Kempf said.

Kurtis' parents had warned that the toddler didn't have an appetite. But the Kempfs patiently persuaded him to eat, providing a steady diet of his favorites: bananas, Greek strawberry yogurt and organic puff snacks.

Caring for Kurtis, Elie

The puffs, in particular, come in handy for the doctor appointments and tests required before their heart surgery.

Ellen Kempf broke into her bag to distract the boys with puffs and other snacks during an exam with Dr. J.R. Bockoven, a pediatric cardiologist at Children's Hospital.

Bockoven first met the boys last year, when he was among the volunteers from Children's examining heart patients at St. Damien Hospital in Haiti.

He then was part of the team that selected the boys from dozens of candidates at St. Damien to become Akron's first Gift of Life patients.

"It's a painstaking process, and it's a very emotional process," Bockoven said. "There are a lot of kids you see that you can't do surgery on because it's too late."

After less than a week with the boys, Ellen Kempf already



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Elie Pierre, 4, sticks out his tongue as Diane Momchilov, a pediatric cardiac sonographer, takes his picture during an appointment at the Akron Children's Hospital Heart Center.



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Ben Kempf, 19, carries Elie Pierre, 4, to the private jet of Jim and Vanita Oelschlagler for the return trip to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Walking with him at Akron-Canton Airport are his sister, Liz Kempf, 24, and interpreter Denso Gay. They were flying to Haiti after Elie's successful surgery in Akron.

knew their personalities well. She could tell Elie was getting nervous when he started wringing his hands in the exam room.

"Happy," she told him, flashing him a reassuring smile.

Gay also quickly grew close to the boys, learning when they needed to be comforted or held.

When Kurtis fussed during his echocardiogram, Gay climbed on the examining table and sprawled out next to the boy to calm him.

The Kempfs made sure the young Haitians got a true taste of American life. They visited the Cleveland Zoo, went on regular walks through the neighborhood in a plastic wagon and became the center of attention at an Easter egg hunt in the Kempfs' yard.

The boys quickly bonded with the Kempfs' 2-year-old granddaughter, Bailee, who often came to the house to play with her new Haitian friends.

Operations repair defects

On the morning of their operations last month, Elie sat comfortably on Ellen Kempf's lap while playing with Jeff Kempf's cell phone.

"Hello! Hello!" he announced into the phone.

When it was his time to go to the operating room, Elie let a nurse lead him away.

"Au revoir," he said, grabbing the nurse's hand.

During Elie's operation, Drs. Philip Smith and Michael Spector, pediatric cardiac surgeons at Children's Hospital, used sutures to tie off a blood vessel that should have closed shortly after birth.

In most cases, the defect can be fixed with surgery alone.

But Elie's vessel was so large that he needed a follow-up procedure to make sure it was fully closed.

The patent ductus arteriosus, or PDA for short, was completely blocked through a catheterization about two weeks later. During the outpatient procedure, Dr. David Waight, director of the cardiac cath lab at Children's, placed an occluder in the vessel to stop any remaining blood flow.

During Kurtis' surgery, the medical team stopped the toddlers' heart from beating so Smith and Spector could place a patch on a hole between the left and right ventricle. A heart and lung machine kept his blood circulating and oxygenated until the procedure was complete.

After each procedure, Smith talked to Ellen Kempf, who waited like an anxious mom for updates.

Gay shared the updates with social workers at St. Damien Hospital, who passed along the messages to the boys' parents in Haiti.

"This will give him life," Ellen Kempf said with relief when Elie's surgery was done.

Stronger than ever

Within several days after their operations, Elie and Kurtis returned to the Kempfs' home, ready to run and play.

Over the next few weeks, it was clear from their increased energy and healthy glows that both boys were getting stronger.

In early May, the Kempfs marked Elie's fourth birthday with a party at their home.

During another celebration for the boys at Children's, the doctors, nurses and other vol-



unteers who cared for them during their stay drew pictures and wrote messages for them in scrapbooks.

"From your 'mama' for a month," Ellen Kempf wrote. "I'll love you always."

Rather than bring gifts to the parties, guests were encouraged to contribute to scholarship funds that the Kempfs established at St. Damien Hospital to pay for the boys' education in Haiti.

If Haitian parents can't afford to send their children to public school, the kids drop out, Gay said.

Donated ride home

Local children's author and philanthropist Vanita Oelschlagler offered to take Ellen Kempf, the boys and Gay to Haiti this month on her family's private jet.

Two of the Kempfs' grown children and Children's medical photographer and graphic designer Ted Stevens went along to help.

The Kempfs crammed as many clothes, toys and other treasured mementos as possible in bags for Elie and Kurtis to take home.

One of the rainbow-colored leis from Eli's fourth birthday party now hangs from the ceil-

HELP FOR ST. DAMIEN

Dr. Jeff Kempf, director of the Office of Pediatric Global Health at Akron Children's Hospital, is organizing a fundraiser to benefit St. Damien Hospital, the only pediatric hospital in Haiti.

The event will take place at 6:30 p.m. Oct. 12 at St. Nicholas Banquet Center, 755 S. Cleveland Ave., Mogadore.

Father Richard Frechette, Haiti national director for Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (NPH), will be the featured speaker.

St. Damien is an NPH health program. The international mission also runs an orphanage in Haiti.

The cost for the event is \$75 per person or \$1,000 per table. For information, email

stdamiensfundakron@gmail.com or call 330-668-3922.

For information about NPH's efforts in Haiti or to donate, go to www.nph.org/ws/homes/home.php?lang=en&haiti.

To learn more about St. Damien Hospital, go to <http://saintdamienhospital.nph.org/>

Gift of Life North East Ohio Inc. also is seeking donations to bring more children from Haiti and other countries to Children's Hospital for heart surgery.

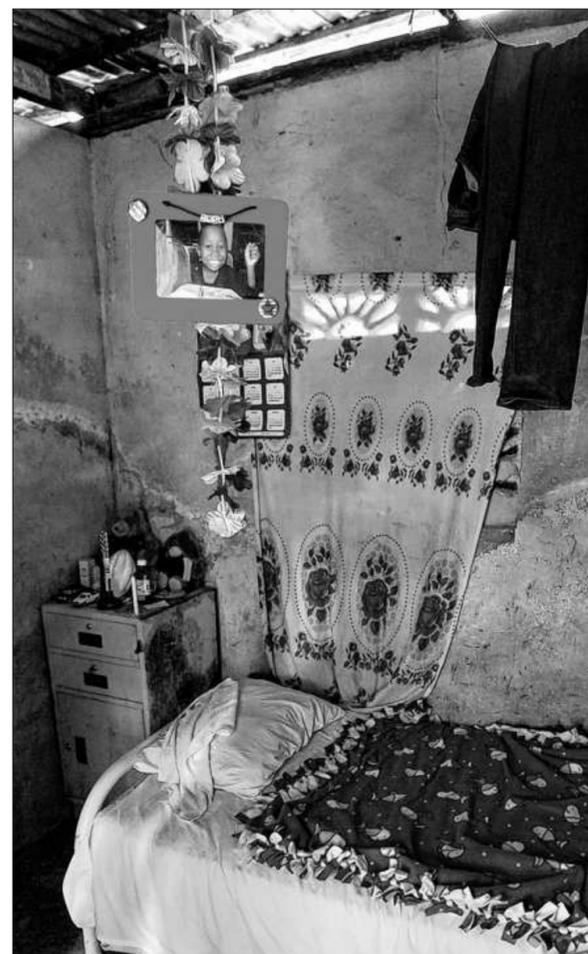
Tax-deductible donations can be sent to Gift of Life North East Ohio, 31 Louise Drive, Chagrin Falls, OH 44022.

For information about the charity, visit www.giftoflifeinternational.org.



TED STEVENS/Special to the Akron Beacon Journal

Ben Kempf, 19, son of Drs. Jeff and Ellen Kempf, gives Elie Pierre, 4, to his happy mother as the Kempfs arrive with Elie and Kurtis at Port-au-Prince International Airport in Haiti.



TED STEVENS/Special to the Akron Beacon Journal

A photo of Elie Pierre, 4, taken at his birthday party while staying in Fairlawn with Drs. Jeff and Ellen Kempf, hangs from the ceiling in his one-room home with no running water or electricity in Haiti.

ing of his barren, one-room home.

The Kempfs hope to see the boys again in August, when the doctors will return to help more patients in Haiti.

"Elie and Kurtis have

touched all of our hearts," Jeff Kempf said. "We have all been blessed by them."

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