

Founders Message II

Contributed by Vito C. Quatela, M.D.

What comes to mind when you hear about a team of plastic surgeons correcting a childhood deformity (referred to as microtia) of the outer ear? If this surgery occurs in a hospital in the US, it probably won't make front page headlines. But now imagine this surgery is performed in a third world country such as Ecuador. Unlike the US, children in Ecuador who have this facial deformity (which is associated with deafness) are viewed as social pariahs and shunned as outcasts. I have heard shocking stories of parents discarding their deformed children in dumpsters to end the shame associated with microtia. Ironically, what stands between these children and the opportunity to lead a normal life is this corrective surgery. In an impoverished country like Ecuador, where an average annual family income is less than \$7,000, surgery is simply not an affordable option. Yet, without this surgery, children with microtia are robbed of a normal life. They are left behind, shunned and forgotten.

In the hands of a skilled surgeon, microtia surgery typically requires about three hours to complete. Using cartilage from the child's rib, the deformed outer ear is rebuilt. Not only does this repair the deformity and in many cases restore the hearing but it also eliminates the social stigma. Of course with microtia repair, a new pathway of life opportunities is opened to the child and his family.

Help Us Give Smiles (HUGS) is the charitable organization I started in 2003. With my team of surgeons and other skilled health care personnel, we travel to Ecuador with the specific mission of helping children with microtia by surgically correcting this deformity. The surgery is performed without cost to these children or their families. The surgical team donates their professional time while travel and surgical expenses are paid for by fund raising efforts here at home. In a one week mission to Ecuador, we can perform 70-80 corrective surgeries. In the 5 years since we began HUGS, we have successfully performed surgery on more than 350 children.

It is HUGS immediate goal to expand our annual missions beyond Ecuador to Guatemala. We want to reach out to more children with microtia in these and other underdeveloped countries. Through your support and our efforts, we can restore smiles to so many children who otherwise confront an uncertain and impoverished future with their disfiguring conditions. Each child has a unique story. I invite you to read the personal stories of Alexander and Maritza and letters written to us by the children served by HUGS.

Alexander and Maritza are just 2 of our many life changing stories. I am proud to say that HUGS missions have made a profound difference to

these children and their families. Through our work, we have provided a bridge from despair and unhappiness to a future filled with hopes and dreams.

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