



AUGUST 31, 2005

Scott Harrison, Photojournalist

In August 2004, Scott Harrison left a life of party promoting to serve as a volunteer photojournalist aboard the Mercy Ship

Anastasis in West Africa. Gothamist visited with Scott at the Metropolitan Pavilion where an exhibition of his work is on display.

The show entitled "*mercy*", presents

"shocking yet redemptive images and soundscapes of poverty, disease and disfigurement." The exhibit is worth checking out and runs through September 8, open 11am-10pm at Metropolitan Pavilion, 123 West 18th St, 4th floor.



Following the interview is information about a gala Scott is hosting to benefit Mercy Ships.

What is Mercy Ships?

Mercy Ships is a non-governmental charity that's been operating a fleet of hospital ships for 26 years. They are primarily surgery ships and all the healthcare is free. They pull into the poorest nations in the world, bring people onto the ship and operate on them. They also build wells and hospitals with field teams, but primarily they provide free surgery.

How did you get involved?

I heard about them. I was a nightclub promoter for many years and wanted to do a year of humanitarian service. I googled them because I heard there was a hospital ship and they weren't hard to find.

So you were looking specifically to work on a hospital ship?

The idea of being with a bunch of surgeons who volunteered to operate for free sounded incredible and I'd always been interested in medicine.

What was your life like in New York before you got involved with

Mercy Ships?

mercy ships?

I was a party kid. I would travel around the world and throw parties. I would go to work normally at 11 and come back at 5, drunk...

5am?

Yes, 5am. My life was chasing fashion week parties and throwing them. It was years of very selfish living, not caring about anyone else, not helping anyone.

How did your family and friends feel about your decision to do this?

I think people were shocked. My family loved it. My dad thought it was ridiculous what I did. I basically got drunk and got others drunk for a living. They completely supported me.

And your friends, did they understand what you were doing?

I don't think they understood. A lot of New Yorkers want to help, they realize there are problems out there and they want to do something about it. I think a lot of my friends were able to live vicariously through me. I was sending reports from the field and I tried to get them to sponsor some wells and I tried to get them involved financially. For the most part my friends were pretty proud of me and did support it.

How prepared were you for the things you were exposed to over there?

I wasn't really prepared. What Mercy Ships primarily does are these benign tumors. Imagine living here and something starts growing on your face. You go to the doctor and he's says it's a little tumor, it's not cancerous and he just chops it off. What I saw in Africa are people with horrific tumors, goiters, cleft lips and deformities because there are basically no doctors in the country; there are no facilities to treat anything major. In Liberia for instance, where we just were, there is one doctor for 50,000 people and there's not a surgeon in the country. A tumor here would never get to the size of a walnut or even a pea, there a tumor could get to nine pounds, the size of a small basketball. So, I wasn't prepared, but you quickly adapt and realize, ok well, I'm going to see a lot of these and we are going to fix them...

What are the main procedures done?

We fix cleft lips, which are a birth defect. We also do tons and tons of cataracts. It's a 20 minute operation and people who have been blind get their sight back. We also do tumors and some reconstructive surgery.

There must be a lot of people that need treatment, how do you decide who gets surgery?

In theory it's first come, first serve. When our ships pull up there are thousands of people who have come and they'll wait days for a doctor; they'll sleep in line. Of the 5,000-7,000 people waiting, we can realistically give care to about 2,000 of them. The nurses will triage the whole line, they'll see all 7,000. Some of the people who are waiting aren't qualified for surgery. they are just coming to see doctors.

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What are some of your early memories of being of the ship?

When I first got on the ship, I went from a 1500 square foot loft with a grand piano, to a 150 square feet with cockroaches and strange roommates. That was difficult. There were times early on when I really wondered what I

had gotten myself into for a year. But you quickly adapt.

I like to tell it this way, when I first arrived on the ship I felt like a real pauper coming from a different lifestyle where I just had things. Then I'm on the ship and I'm sleeping in bunk beds, it's a prison in some ways. Then you go out into villages and they don't have that and they don't have electricity and they don't have water, so you sort of become a king again. You realize, wow, I took a shower this morning. It might be chef boyardee for 400, but I'm going to get three meals today while they are wondering where the next meal is coming from. You quickly become grateful for what you have, even if it's a much lower standard than what you had previously. In that way it definitely changed my life. I can live on nothing and be grateful because there are millions of people with not even that much.

What's a typical day like for you?

I'm like the last one to wake up in my department. Breakfast is 6:30am-7:30am and I think in eight months I've had four breakfasts and that was when we were flying out by helicopter to patients' screenings. I sort stumble out of bed at 8:25am. I'm in the office by 8:30am with a three-minute shower, wearing jeans and a t-shirt everyday. Hopefully different ones but it's Africa so sometimes it doesn't feel like it matters. And then I work until about 9pm at night. A lot of times I'll jump in a Land Rover and drive to one of our well projects or cover a hospital we're building.

On the ship I was pretty much responsible for taking pictures of every patient before surgery and after surgery, which is an amazing pleasure and honor. I meet them all and develop relationships. I photograph during a lot of the big surgeries, so I've scrubbed up for 15 surgeries, some 12 hours long and I love it. It's amazing spending time with the surgeons and seeing how much the human body can take.

Some of the people you photograph are embarrassed by their appearance, how do they feel about being documented? How do you deal with it?

I just try to look them all in the face. People have stoned them because of their deformities and they've had to hide their faces. Honestly, I've seen so many deformities at this point it is easy for me to just treat them like the next person and I think that helps. I just try to establish a rapport and I'm just kind. We don't stare, we don't point, it's not that difficult.

Let's go to your exhibit. The first thing you look at is Liberia and the conditions there, can you talk about that...

Liberia use to be relatively affluent. People, Europeans and Americans, would go there on vacation. It was founded in 1822 by freed slaves and the country's constitution was written at Harvard. Their flag looks remarkably

...and a constitution was written after that. They took something similar to the American flag and gave it 4 years of (Sierra Leone) Toronto | Washington DC
 knows who Charles Taylor is just from reading the papers. He really destroyed the country. According to the UN, it's the only country in the world with no electricity, no running water and no sewage in its capital city. It's a desperate place. A Liberian will make \$150/year. 1 million people were

displaced from their homes because of war. There's one doctor for every 50,000 and there are only three dentists in a country of 3.5 million. The statistics are staggering. They are so poor and they suffer because of the poverty. The hospital conditions are appalling. There are maybe two decent hospitals, decent by West African standards, certainly shocking by our western standards. They are run by the Catholics and run on generators part of the time.

But, Liberia is holding elections next month and hopefully they will elect a leader who can start rebuilding the country. The UN is there with peacekeepers enforcing a very tenuous peace.

Not that we can be everywhere, but do you think the US should be doing more?

The Liberians certainly feel that way. They feel this incredible tie to the United States; we are their brothers. It's difficult as an American because most of my friends have never heard of this country and you go over there and they feel so close to us.

How do they react to you?

The Liberians are extremely friendly, giving people. Someone was telling me today at the gallery that they were just in West Africa and wasn't it amazing how a West African would just give you the shirt off his back, even having nothing.

What gets them through?

A lot of them are religious and have faith in God that he will provide. When they are sick they pray because they realize there is no doctor and that their salvation could almost be in the form of a ship, as supernatural or out there as someone else saving them. They have a courage that a lot of us don't have.



You feature quite a few people in the show and tell their stories. Can you take me through one...

Sure, I want to talk about Marthaline. She's from Liberia, a striking woman. She had an enormous tumor growing out of her mouth. She was walking around with a towel and her husband left her with two kids. She left them with her grandmother and came to the ship. It was a fairly simple surgery. It took about an hour and half to return her to normal. After the surgery there was no trace of the tumor she had.



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This was the last time I cried, it was a couple months ago. I heard that one of our nurses was helping Marthaline with some money to go to a trade school in Monrovia, we are talking about a couple hundred dollars here. Three weeks

after her surgery I saw her in the lunch room, I said "You look amazing. What was it like to go back and see your villagers?" And she didn't have the \$11 to take the cab back across the country, it would have actually cost her \$22 because she would have had to come back to Monrovia. I couldn't imagine being deformed for 3 years, you're restored to normalcy and \$11 separates you from traveling across the country to tell everyone look I'm healed. Obviously we gave her the \$30 so she could visit them.

Did you cry a lot while you were there?

The first day I saw a little boy with a 5 pound tumor and he weighed 40 pounds. You don't really know what to do except cry a little and then you take the pictures. It got easier. I cry if there's heartbreaking stuff and there's times when it's so amazing, like I'll cry when someone gets their sight back after 5 years.

We were talking about religion before, how religious or spiritual are you?

I grew up in the Church and deeply rebelled at 18 years old and did everything the opposite. I got into as much trouble as I could in the last 10 years. I sort of had a spiritual re-awaking and realized I was miserable and living very selfishly. It was sort of this empty feeling, having got what I thought I wanted. I started to explore spirituality again, but in a different way, in more of a personal way. It's been a spiritual journey I guess.

So, how has the experience changed you?

I'm totally grateful for being born in the west and for our health and wealth. I've been a volunteer so I haven't made any money for the last year, in fact we all pay \$500/month to be on the ship, which is a little bit ironic. I feel so rich, we have so much. I have never thought about returning to clubs. I want continue this course.

What was it like coming back to New York?

It was a lot easier than I thought. Everybody talks about culture shock. I'm pretty self-aware and I don't think the culture would have changed just because I went away. Drinks instead of \$14 went to \$16. It's \$32 for two margaritas when \$16 buys a bag of rice for a family for a month. I've bought that \$16 bag of rice and delivered it. It's a different concept of wealth.

Instead of getting angry, I've just tried to talk to people about ways they can help either financially or volunteering. I've tried to make it positive and not guilt anyone. I lived that way for 10 years and in a sense, we don't know any better.

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I think because I was a photographer, I have had an easy time because I can tell the story through my pictures, which is more compelling. They force people to react.

And what do you plan to do after the year?

I want to go back to write a book about the Chief Medical Officer who has been there 18 years. He's a remarkable man and so humble. He left Los Angeles. He could be making millions of dollars. I think I have a lot to learn from him. And I also want to start a charity.

Mercy Ships and Scott Harrison will host a gala fundraiser on Wednesday, September 7 from 6pm-10:00pm at the Metropolitan Pavilion (123 West 18th St). Jeffery Chodorow of China Grill Management (Asia de Cuba, Brasserie Caviar and Banana, China Grill, English is Italian, Hudson Cafeteria and Ono) has donated the food and there will be a silent auction. Tickets are \$125 and are available [here](#).

Posted by [Mindy Bond](#) in [Interview](#)

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COMMENTS

Wow! Such a moving story, partyboy makes good, real good. No sarcasm. Congrats to Gothamist for the coverage. Those 3rd world tumors are really

gross...

Posted by: jacob at August 31, 2005 02:14 PM

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