A Future Worth Dreaming Of

Not long ago, Wang Li had no reason to dream for her future. Life in a remote, poor Chinese village can be difficult enough, but for Wang Li, it was far worse. Born to face an ignorant world with a wide cleft in her lip, she was never an accepted part of her community. Except for her loving but helpless family, she was isolated, feared, laughed at. 11 years old, she had never been to school.

She didn't know that far away in a New York office, people were discussing an idea that would change her life. The newly-formed Smile Train had determined its core mission – helping local doctors and nurses help local children in under-developed countries – and identified China, a country with many well-trained, experienced doctors, as a perfect place to start.

Through established cleft contacts, we identified a qualified Chinese surgeon, and told him we would pay for him to treat a child with cleft who could never afford treatment otherwise. He asked around, and heard the story of the girl who never left her home, the girl with no smile.

The day of Wang Li's surgery was nighttime in New York. Into a Manhattan ballroom, packed with people whom life had blessed, came Wang Li via satellite, explaining through her malformed mouth a little about her life. Just 45 minutes later she was back – with salve covering the stitches that allowed her to smile for the first time in her life. By the time this girl who had never been to school said she wanted to be a doctor when she grew up, there wasn't a dry eye in the house. The Smile Train and Wang Li's future were both born that night.

The Light of Doribel's Life

When Doribel left her Venezuelan shantytown home for the marketplace that morning, she had no idea the trip would change her life forever. Among the fruit, vegetables and household goods for sale that day was something someone had simply left for whoever wanted it. Given away, like yesterday's stale bread. It was a tiny baby girl. Born with a cleft lip and palate, she was abandoned by her mother. Poverty, ignorance and a facial deformity had all conspired to give this child the worst possible start in life: rejected by her own family, left alone and defenseless, without even the protection of a baby's beautiful face.

But luck had not abandoned her completely. When Doribel set eyes on the infant, her heart was moved. She brought her to a Maracaibo clinic established by Rotaplast, one of the long-standing international cleft organizations The Smile Train supports. Funding from The Smile Train allows the clinic to provide free surgery to the poorest of the poor, and the abandoned baby became Rotaplast's 2000th patient, operated on by Dr. Angelo Capozzi, co-founder and medical director.

A few days after the surgery, Rotaplast team members visited Doribel and the baby she now considered her daughter. Appalled at the new family's squalid living conditions, and moved by the fact that a woman with less than nothing was sharing everything with an adopted infant, they arranged to build them a new home. In the spring of 2000, Doribel and the baby she named Luz – meaning "light" in Spanish – moved in. From being abandoned in a marketplace, Luz has become a beautifully smiling toddler, the light of Doribel's life.

Like the Cleft of Maria

Little Maria couldn't even be born in her own home town in Bulgaria. The country has undergone a decade of immense social changes, and the transformation's effect on healthcare has been catastrophic. Her mother, father and 4-year old brother Nikolai traveled 100km into the Rhodopes mountains for the birth.

The horrified looks on the doctors and nurses faces at what should have been a magical moment said it all – Maria was born with a cleft lip and palate. In the U.S., a multidisciplinary team of specialists would quickly go to work, with emotional support extended to the parents as a matter of course. Here in Bulgaria, the staff could only confirm the family's worst fears: treatment would be very difficult to find and extremely expensive, and their best chance lay far away in the city of Plovdiv.

Completely on their own but determined to help their daughter, Maria's parents made their way to the Plastic and Craniofacial Unit, Higher Medical Institute of Plovdiv, supported by The Smile Train through ALA, a small, relatively young association dedicated to facilitating support for Bulgarian children born with craniofacial deformities.

Against all odds, Maria was operated on with great success, and her father Peter was elected to the new Administrative Council of ALA. The only one still questioning the operation is her brother Nikolai, who, filled with unconditional love for his sister, wonders why other babies don't have clefts, and where Maria's cleft went. When he saw a flower with split leaves, he said "It is like the cleft of Maria."

A Family for "Punky"

When Todor was born, the doctors at the Plovdiv hospital kept their faces calm and professional – and kept the fact that he had a cleft lip and palate a secret from his parents for a whole day.

The doctors were well aware that in Bulgaria, ignorance, negative social perceptions, a difficult-to-navigate health system and general poverty combine in a horrifying statistic: 30% of children born with cleft are abandoned to orphanages. Otherwise normal, healthy, bright children – filled with potential but condemned to grow up far from their families in an overwhelmed, understaffed, state-run facility.

The day's reprieve may have saved Todor's family. When doctors approached the parents with the truth, they were devastated, but already psychologically bonded with their new son and reluctant to give him away. ALA quickly stepped in. Supported by The Smile Train, ALA is a small, relatively young association dedicated to facilitating the bewildering task facing parents of children born with craniofacial deformities in Bulgaria.

With the help of an ALA film demonstrating feeding techniques for newborns with clefts, Todor (nicknamed "Punky" for a head of hair that refused to lay flat) was soon breastfeeding successfully. Armed with updated information and crucial emotional support, his parents grew stronger and more committed to their son every day. At one month, Todor's cleft was operated on. Perhaps he will never know how close he came to joining the thousands of children just like him, whose families will never know how special they are.

The Boy With No Face

When Roberto was born, even the seasoned doctors and nurses were shocked. His cleft lip and palate were so severe, his face was almost divided in two. They gently explained to his mother that the baby's chances for survival, much less a normal life, were virtually nonexistent.

But they had miscalculated the mother's determination to fight for her little Roberthino – the youngest of ten and twin to a normal brother. Desperate to give him a face and a life, she made her way to SOBRAPAR – the Brazilian Society for Research and Care for Craniofacial Rehabilitation. SOBRAPAR is a multi-disciplinary clinic at Campinas' Hospital for Plastic and Craniofacial Surgery, founded by Dr. Cassio Raposo do Amaral. Support from The Smile Train has helped Dr. Cassio fulfill his lifelong dream: that even in the most remote backland of the country, no child should be found growing up with the stigma of a facial deformity.

The overwhelming nature of Roberto's condition required intervention from every specialty at SOBRAPAR: seventeen surgeries, orthodontia, and years of therapy to counter speech and communication problems that slowed his social and academic progress.

Now he is fully communicative, literate, and employed as an office clerk. Says his mother, "It's a godsend: my son has a face. Maybe he is not so handsome to others. To me, he is just beautiful and I know what this means. Today, he is happy and so am I."

Happily Ever After

In 1998, the cleft care team at Hospital San Felipe in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, was frustrated. The need for cleft care in their community was great, and the dedicated social workers, psychologists, surgeons and dentists had worked hard to form a multidisciplinary, Honduran team to meet that need. Money, however, was an insurmountable obstacle. The Honduran government covers less than 10% of the cost for cleft lip and palate surgery, and in an area of devastating poverty, poor children born with cleft were simply left untreated. The clinic could only afford to offer their services part-time.

A dedicated foreign doctor had come down to operate free for the fourth time that year, and this time the lucky patient was Juan Carlos. When Juan Carlos woke up, he asked if he could see himself. Holding the mirror close and admiring his new face he said, "Now I can go back to my town, find a nice woman, marry and live happily ever after." Juan Carlos was 51 years old.

Now The Smile Train is the clinic's partner, and Honduran children like Anthony Quiroz, above, will not have to wait fifty, thirty, fifteen or even three years to smile and speak like normal children. Miracles are happening there full time, and everyone is smiling: the cleft patients, their families, and the doctors. Directors Reid and Rita Mayta say, "The dignity that accompanies a smile brings out the best a person has to offer society.

Embarrassment, tragedy and low self-esteem will not be words in the vocabulary of these children's lives. The Smile Train has arrived in Honduras."

DeLois – this is the one from the web. I think Brian might say he wasn't miserable enough to begin with – what do you think?

One early winter morning seven years ago in northwest China, a baby's cry woke Grandma Ren. She dressed, opened the door, and found the courtyard full of snow. There she discovered a baby wrapped in a cloth. Grandma quickly carried the baby into her house to warm him. When she looked into his face, she realized why he had been abandoned. The boy had a cleft lip.

Grandma had raised her own seven children alone and now they were all grown. When the baby came into her life, it made her very happy. From then on, she would be a mother to him.

The boy's name is "Luo Luo" and he brought life to the small village. When he grew a bit, he imitated Grandma from behind as she worked in the fields. He started taking the cow out to eat grass when he could barely walk. He was good at whatever he did.

Grandma would hold Luo Luo in her arms and feel very happy. She promised herself to cure the child's deformity.

One day, the neighbor brought news that The Smile Train had arrived in Xiaogan City. Grandma anxiously asked how much the surgery would cost — "Nothing. They are kind-hearted people who are here to help us." Grandma could remain still no longer and sent Luo Luo to Xiaogan City immediately. The surgery was very successful and Luo Luo became the passenger 202 on The Smile Train.

Now, Luo Luo hugs grandma's neck and smiles.