



Mahindo Ndonga and his son Gabriel celebrate a successful surgery.

Gabriel's

Good News

Finding a miracle in being faithful to God's call | KATE MARIE ENGLUND

The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news." (Luke 1:19)

God's story of provision and faithfulness for a young boy in the Democratic Republic of Congo started long before I met him. Gabriel Ndonga was born with a heart defect that prevents adequate oxygen from

being supplied to the body. Tetralogy of Fallot (TOF) is a common defect that is routinely addressed in infants in the developed world before they are a year old. Without open-heart surgery, however, most children with TOF die by the age of ten. Gabriel was already eleven years old when I met him in the spring of 2009.

After graduating from college, I was working for the international relief organization Samaritan's Purse in Congo. My job was to do logistics

and finance for relief distributions to provide food, building projects, and hygiene items to families who had been displaced by violence. The war had ravaged so many people's lives that their needs were overwhelming, and I received countless requests for help. But when Gabriel's father approached me, I felt God calling me

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not only to get involved in Gabriel's life but also to make sacrifices to respond to his needs.

While they were busy taking care of their other eight children, Gabriel's parents had been faithfully praying for God to create a miracle every day since Gabriel's birth. His father, Mahindo, told me that Gabriel became his mother's helper around their one-room hut because he could not walk far without running out of breath and having to sit down to rest. The operation he needed would be expensive, and it had to be performed outside of Africa. Few countries have the capacity to repair TOF on a child as old as Gabriel.

I could not shake the idea that if I had been born with the same problem, I would have already had the operation and be living a normal life—only because I was born in the United States. When I returned to the States to start graduate school that summer, I couldn't stop thinking about Gabriel. I made up my mind to sacrifice everything I could to help him.

As an unemployed student, however, I did not have the money Gabriel needed. I did not know anything about heart defects, so I did some investigating. I emailed a heart foundation in the United States for information and was astonished when a cardiologist called me back the next morning. He took time to carefully lay out the options for heart surgery abroad. India seemed to be the most affordable and practical option in terms of traveling from Africa. "But," he warned me, "you will need at least \$15,000, so I don't know how involved you want to get."

I wondered why God had gotten me so involved with this boy. Was he

going to provide for Gabriel's needs? I knew it was easy for me to give whatever money I could to Gabriel, because I had met him face-to-face, but how could I expect those who didn't know him to feel the same way?

I was soon humbled by the willing-



Gabriel with Kate Marie Englund after he was released from ten days in ICU

ness of friends, family, and my home church of West Hills Covenant in Portland, Oregon, to help a boy they had never met. Through bake sales and lemonade stands, everyone soon was caught up in Gabriel's story and eager to help.

Within a few short months, we had raised enough to schedule the surgery in India. But Gabriel still faced unforeseen setbacks.

In December of 2009 Gabriel and Mahindo made plans to travel by plane for the first time in their lives for the surgery. As they were waiting for the plane to land in Congo, it crashed, and they returned home to begin their journey the next day.

When they finally arrived at the hospital in Chennai, India, the doctor discovered that Gabriel had extensive pulmonary tuberculosis. He sent Gabriel back to Congo with TB medicine and no heart surgery. On their way home, they were detained

in Mumbai because their immigration papers had not been signed correctly by the officials in Chennai. They were forced to fly back to Chennai to fix the problem, and then back to Mumbai. When they arrived in Addis Ababa, Ethiopian Airlines did not want to let Gabriel get on a plane to Kigali without a doctor's note saying it was safe for him to fly. He was required to stay the night in Ethiopia and go to a hospital to be cleared to travel.

I was devastated by the setbacks. I asked God what he was doing. I grieved over the lost funds. We had raised about \$14,000 at that point, which I had thought would be enough to cover the \$10,000 surgery plus travel expenses. But the additional airfare and medical tests meant that when Gabriel and his father

returned to Congo, we were down to \$8,000.

It seemed like every step along the way there was a new obstacle. While Gabriel was recovering from TB, his family's hut caught fire after an accident at their neighbor's house. His father carried Gabriel out of the house first because Gabriel could not run, and no one was hurt. Miraculously, Gabriel's medical documents and passports were also saved from the fire.

After six months of the TB medication, Gabriel's lungs were clear. More generous support from West Hills Covenant meant that Gabriel and Mahindo were able to travel to India again. I was working in Ethiopia that summer, so I was able to join Gabriel and his father on this second trip. Navigating airports and immigration officials had been a challenge for them on the first trip, so they were glad to have me there to help with the

details. At the hospital in India I was able to serve as translator as well.

On August 19, 2010, Gabriel underwent a successful heart surgery. But his recovery was not easy. In the days after the operation, his body struggled to adjust to the renewed supply of blood and oxygen to the lungs. Two days after the operation, Gabriel was on a ventilator in critical condition. When Mahindo saw him hooked up to the machines, he was convinced that Gabriel was dead. Again we turned to God in prayer and endured the painful process of waiting.

On the eighth day of Gabriel's ICU stay, I received what I feared was an urgent call from the ICU. But the news turned out to be wonderful. "Gabriel is getting bored," they said. "Can you go buy him some toys?" There was nothing I wanted to do more!

After ten days in the ICU, Gabriel was finally released with a restored heart and body. We watched in awe as he walked down the halls of the hospital without becoming tired for the first time in his life. Mahindo continues to be in disbelief that he no longer has to carry his son around. After three weeks in India, Gabriel and his father made it safely back to their family in Congo, joyfully testifying about all God has done for them.

Being used by God is not easy and can sometimes feel like more of a burden than a joy. But I was never the one in control. Even though I do not know if I will ever see Gabriel again, God continues to show me that this story is not finished, as it was never my story to begin with. Gabriel's journey is a reminder that life is precious in a country that has been ravaged by war and death. Hope does not disappoint, for we hope, not in happy endings, but in a God who saves us, cares for us, and uses the

least of us to extend his healing hand to his children.

One of the Indian doctors noticed how fitting it was that his patient's name was Gabriel. "Gabriel was the angel who was always telling good news," he said. It is my hope that Gabriel's life continues to shine forth God's love and provision for us, bringing glory to his name. ■