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Straightening Bended Knees

Joyce de Gooijer



Her name is Elizabeth. When she was born, nature had played a trick on her. The first day I met her she was contently curled up in her 16-year-old mother's arms. At two weeks old, Elizabeth's large brown eyes, full head of soft, dark, downy hair and typical baby gurgle gave her the image of perfection.

This story starts with Pat, a Flying Medical Service (FMS) pilot, at one of 25 bush clinics that provide pre and post natal care in remote areas of Tanzania. A grandmother, concerned for her two day old granddaughter, asked Pat to look at Elizabeth's legs. Nature's trick had her knees bending in the opposite direction.

The timing could not have been better. Pat knew a specialist from the Netherlands, currently working in

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Arusha, who would be able to assess Elizabeth. Two weeks later, Elizabeth and Noondonomo, her mother, started their three month experience and culture shock 'firsts'. TJ, another FMS pilot, flew them to Arusha, then drove them to the FMS compound. A lifetime of walking was replaced by a plane trip and numerous car journeys. As the Serengeti was replaced by a city with a million people, nature's sounds and smells were over-ridden by people, exhaust, and the rush of vehicles.

FMS volunteers serve various roles in the organization. Mine was to drive Elizabeth and her mother to the hospital. I watched Noondonomo's eyes fill with awe, fear and uncertainty. Elizabeth, unaware of these sudden changes quietly suckled, content in her mother's arms.

ALMC Hospital offered Noondonomo another lifetime of experiences. Standing in the corner of a medical room, she nervously watched two specialists manipulate



Elizabeth's knees. Within 15 minutes, each leg donned in a cast from hip to ankle, a crying Elizabeth was returned to her mother's arms. Amazingly, that's all it took: having her legs cast, Elizabeth's body was able to build her badly-needed knee caps. Without the casts, she would never have walked.

Noondonomo and Elizabeth were moved to the Plaster House, a facility where children recover from medical treatment for various physical ailments. Three months later, her casts were removed. The same plane that whisked them away from everything they knew returned them to Olorbelin, and their family. Life returned to normal.

One day, Elizabeth will be told stories she doesn't remember. Stories of planes, cities, and hospitals will be adventures she understands only from her mother's stories. The best part is she will hear the stories, not as a handicapped child, but a child fully participating in her nomadic culture, walking with her family along the desert shores of a remote Tanzanian lake. ■