Grace Agwaru
Uganda

As she told her story, Grace shared these thoughts:

> *"My surgery became real through a combination of several categories of people. The blood donors are one special group that I owe so much gratitude. They will never know the lives that they save or guess that their blood will be used for a critical case such as a patient in urgent need of heart surgery. Yet they just donate their blood in case someone may need it.*
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> *I will always be thankful because now I realize that every time we save a child through surgery, it was critical that some people needed to donate blood and certainly they did that for me. Let's keep informing the world of this increasing need to donate blood, and the role it has played in the past in saving lives."*
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> *Imagine how many liters of blood these surgeries have consumed. Without the blood donors, no medicine or funding could bridge this gap.*

In the summer of 1975 doctors told the parents of Grace Agwaru, a four-year old in Uganda, that she would not live to her 16th birthday. Grace was born with a hole between the two lower chambers of her heart. The doctors in Uganda knew Grace needed corrective surgery, but there were no facilities for open heart operations in her country at the time. As her condition grew worse, her parents were unable to cope with the medical bills.

Through contacts made by doctors and a devoted Rotarian, Robert Donnno, the Rotary Club of Kampala, and the Rotary Club of Manhasset, New York, Grace and her family were given hope. The Rotary Club of Manhasset and St. Francis Hospital, both on Long Island, New York, had offered to help Grace.

Grace's parents were frightened as they considered the long road ahead, but they knew this was her only chance. Grace and her father traveled to the United States for the operation nearly 35 years ago.

Robbie Donno's late mum was my host when she came to the US for my surgery.

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On November 15, 1975, Grace received her new heart at the age of 5.

Since that day, Grace's whole life has changed. Immediately, after surgery, she observed that she "got all my energy back".

"*This experience makes me feel special. I have been given a second chance in life*," said Grace. "*I am now 38, 22 years more than the maximum life I had been given by doctors and my health is perfect! I cannot remember the last time I was ill*."

Grace graduated as an agricultural economist, and has been involved in training people to grow crops and help make them reach self-sufficient. She currently works for Gift Life International as Ambassador. She is deeply grateful for her own life and for the Gift of Life International, a program that now addresses the medical needs of children who suffer from congenital heart defects and other similar conditions, for changing the lives of children and families like hers around the world. Grace was the first child to benefit from this program. This journey came full circle in the fall of 2008 when Grace Agwaru, the first Gift of Life recipient, retraced the path she traveled 33 years ago from Uganda to New York with Jonathan, the 10,000th recipient.