Grace Agwaru
Uganda

"My "accidental" contact with The Rotary Global Network for Blood Donation during our Gift of Life reception at the Rotary Convention in Birmingham England is something I will always be thankful for 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."

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. In May 2009, Gift of Life international (GOLI) sponsored, 30 Ugandan children, for heart surgery. To date, GOLI has performed over 11.000 heart surgeries worldwide.*
>
> *Imagine how many liters of blood these surgeries have consumed. Without the blood donors, no medicine or funding could bridge this gap. I have been a blood donor before but never had I taken deep thought to how critical my donation may have been. "*

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.

When 29-year old Rotarian Robert Donno heard about her story through a request from the Rotary Club of Kampala in Uganda he went to his weekly Rotary meeting with a modest idea in mind; to help save the life of a single child in Uganda. He knew he must do something. With the help of his fellow Manhasset Rotarians, Robbie came up with a plan to bring the child from Uganda to the United States so that she could receive life saving open heart surgery.

Through contacts made by doctors and the Rotary Club of Kampala, Grace and her family were soon told there was 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. Robbie convinced Grace's father to bring her to the United States, marking the first time a Ugandan would have open heart surgery. At that time,

Robbie could not have envisioned that his plan would evolve into a worldwide movement ultimately responsible for saving the lives of thousands of children around the world.

Grace and her father traveled to the United States for the operation nearly 35 years ago. To this day, Mr. Agwaru is still amazed at the hospitality he received from everyone he met as he traveled to the United States. In 2009 Grace provided photographs and wrote:

"*Robbie Donno's late mum was my host when I was in the US for my surgery.*

I also have the second photo with dad next to me. Dad was finally the person who took me for the surgery after mum and dad had a long argument as to whether I should really have the surgery. It was so scary for them and dad had the courage. These photos are a great message for me ... a message of sincere love from my parents represented by dad and of the other people who participated in my life saving surgery, as represented by Robbie's mum. To me it shows we only have to be willing to give what we can, anything we do could be the reason someone lives."

.

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

"*Grace's father collapsed in my arms when they were about to leave New York after Grace's operation, thanking me over and over again for saving his daughter's life*," said Donno. "*I thought my life had been worth living. I had made a difference in his life and hers*."

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

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 and her father started a Rotary Club in their hometown of Soroti. 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. She realizes the many different components that went into the success of her surgery, the vision of Robbie Donno, the openness of the Rotary Clubs in Uganda and the United States, the willingness of doctors and hospitals in the United States and the availability of donor blood during and follow the surgery. Without any one of these components, she would not have survived.

"*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 enthusiastically maintains that this experience has made her feel special. She believes her second chance at life motivates her in making important life choices. She graduated from Makerere University with a Bachelors Degree in Agricultural Economics and is currently Through her career she worked with disadvantaged communities both at her work place and in her home village, encouraging them to appreciate themselves as well as being self-sufficient. Currently, she is completing her master's degree in agricultural extension and management.

"*I only knew that I had a heart problem,*" Grace was quoted as saying to Daily Monitor Online in 2008. "*I did not know that I was in such a dangerous condition that it could have shortened my life, but my parents had lost hope of having me live beyond 16.*"

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. On October 2, 2008 Grace and Jonathan arrived at JFK Airport. Six days later Jonathan underwent successful open heart surgery at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, New York.

In the photo provided by the National Ethnic Coalition, Ugandans Jonathan Olunga, 11, the 10,000th child to receive life-saving, open-heart surgery from the Gift of Life, left, and 38-year-old Grace Agwaru, the first person to receive the Gift of Life 33 years ago.
http://newshopper.sulekha.com/topic/slideshow/open-heart-surgery/499334.htm

The first picture above is of Grace Agwaru in front of her own picture at the Rotary Convention in Birmingham, England, summer 2009