

In Zimbabwe, “kids would point and say, ‘Look at him!’” says Beloved (in the backyard of the Trubenbach home in Lake Forest, Calif., last October).

AN AFRICAN BOY'S HEALING YEAR

When Jennifer Trubenbach met a teenager in Zimbabwe whose face had been disfigured by a land mine, her life—and his—would never be the same

BY ALEXANDRA ROCKEY FLEMING AND RICHARD JEROME
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID BUTOW

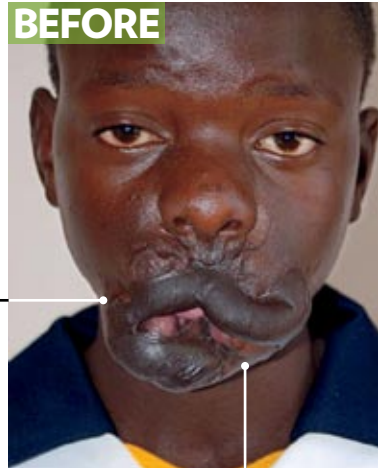


AT THE DOCTOR'S, OCT. 23: Beloved was stoic as Dr. Babak Azizzadeh (left) outlined the plans to rebuild his face.

AN EXTRAORDINARY NINE-HOUR SURGERY

On Oct. 29, at UCLA Medical Center, Dr. Babak Azizzadeh and Dr. Keith Blackwell performed reconstructive surgery on Beloved. Their plan: Undo some early reparative work done in Zimbabwe right after the accident and reshape his mouth to give him a more normal appearance and improved function. Here's how they did it.

BEFORE



7:55 A.M.

Remove scar tissue and original graft (sausage-like structure); remaining part will be used to create portion of upper lip.

8:30 A.M.

Raise fallen chin and lower lip to a more natural position.

9:15 A.M.

Reattach mouth muscles to corners of mouth.

11 A.M.

Harvest 3-in. radial forearm flap (skin, artery and vein).

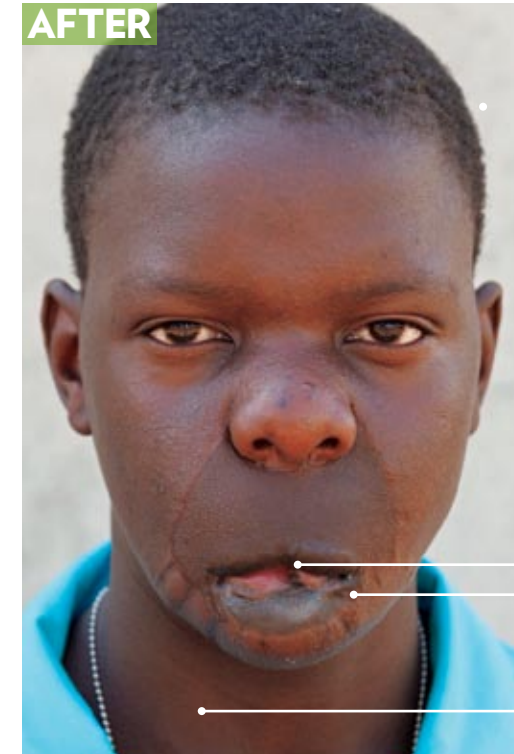
2 P.M.

Re-create rest of upper lip with transplanted radial forearm flap.

5 P.M.

Connect forearm flap artery and vein to neck artery and vein to restore blood supply.

AFTER



POST-SURGERY, OCT. 29: "I simply hoped that he would hold his head high and be proud," says Jennifer (with Beloved after the operation).

In a village in Zimbabwe, a 15-year-old boy spent his days staring at the dirt floor in his house. He was hiding his face. "People would look at me and laugh," he says, speaking in his native Shona through a translator. Some kids called him "Monster," but his name was Beloved.

His life had changed the summer he turned 9. Playing with friends in a field near his grandmother's house, he put a battery-shaped, metallic-looking object in his mouth. It was a land mine. "It blew up," he says. "It hurt so much and bled a lot. My grandmother pushed a blanket into my face."

He clung to life at Parirenyatwa Hospital in Harare. Over the next months,

doctors did their best to stitch together his shredded tongue and lips; they took tissue from his abdominal wall to fashion a mouth. The result was grotesque, as if someone had glued on sausages where his lips had been. Beloved tried to return to school, but his face proved such a distraction, he came home one day and refused to go back. "All those years, to have a child sitting, doing nothing," Beloved's mother, Gina, says. "I'd ask myself, what kind of life will he have?"

Then Beloved met Jennifer Trubenbach. A 49-year-old mom from Orange County, Calif., who talks a mile a minute and loves Mexican food, she's head of Operation of Hope (www.operationofhope.org; 800-203-9366),

a nonprofit that has performed some 2,000 free cleft-lip and -palate and other facial reconstructive surgeries in Zimbabwe and Ecuador. "The first time I saw him," Jennifer recalls of her trip to Zimbabwe in October 2006, "it was as if the weight of his sadness was pressing into my chest. I thought, 'What if this were my child?'"

Jennifer consulted with doctors on her team. Beloved's case was extreme. If he were to have a chance of regaining the face he was born with, he'd

have to come to America and stay for months. Jennifer took a breath. In Zimbabwe, Beloved shared a three-room, brick-and-cement house with no electricity or running water with Gina, two sisters, a brother and several other relatives; his life was full of hardship, but also full of love. Still, Gina, a vegetable vendor, wanted her son to go. "No one else would help us," she says. "God pushed Jen to us."

Jennifer also had her own family to think about—her husband, Ted, a therapist, and Mari, then a 16-year-

IN CLASS, DEC. 3:
“The ice he had frozen
on when he got here is
chipping off,” says
teacher Marti Adams
of Beloved (with his
kindergarten classmates
in Mission Viejo).



old high school junior busy with AP classes and rehearsing for the school musical, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. “I’d never had to share my parents before—I was a little hesitant,” recalls Mari, now a college freshman. “But I understood.” So, after a year’s planning, on Oct. 22, 2007, Jennifer and Beloved boarded a 747 and, after passing through Los Angeles International Airport, arrived at the Trubenbach home in Lake Forest.

At first, every day brought wonders. Riding a moving walkway in a shopping mall, Beloved continued to march in place after stepping off the conveyor belt. He took long showers, his first. He hung out in his bedroom, which Mari had decorated with gold curtains, a blue comforter and pictures of Africa.

Up until now, his only close acquaintance with modern media had been a black-and-white television hooked up to a car battery; now, he had a Game Boy, iPod (downloading Beyoncé and Oliver Mtukudzi, a Zimbabwean pop star) and digital camera. “Living here,”



THIS BOY'S LIFE, APRIL 4: “We had to guide him and set limits,” says Ted Trubenbach (showing Beloved how to fix a bicycle).

he told a visitor in clipped English, “it’s good. The house. And bikes. And movies. And computers.”

On Oct. 29, after Jennifer kissed him on the forehead, Beloved underwent a nine-hour surgery performed by Dr. Keith Blackwell and Dr. Babak Azzizadeh at UCLA Medical Center (see box). Waking up, on a morphine

drip, Beloved looked in the mirror. He gave Jennifer a groggy thumbs-up. “It’s good,” he’d say later. “The mouth is right.”

As the swelling went down, he began to look like the handsome boy he’d once been. The scars remained, but doctors who monitored his progress over the months say these will

“

I want him to have the simple things in life I take for granted. To love, to be loved. To have a purpose. To matter”

—JENNIFER TRUBENBACH



THE O.C., MARCH 27: “He’s one of the sweetest people I’ve ever met,” says Bree Williams (on Beloved’s back at San Onofre State Beach).

fade over time. And while the muscle damage caused by the accident prevented a grin, there was a new light in Beloved’s eyes.

In his first couple of months with the Trubenbachs, he kept a stony silence. In the morning, he’d pour himself a bowl of cereal and kick a soccer ball around the yard; later, he’d settle on the living room couch to watch wrestling or a Jackie Chan DVD. “All he’d say was ‘yes’ or ‘no,’” says Jennifer, who is still trying to raise money to pay for Beloved’s \$180,000 hospital charges, which she covered at the time by taking out a second mortgage on her home. (The surgeons donated their services.)

Jennifer enrolled Beloved at the private Heritage Christian School in Mission Viejo. Because of the education he’d missed and because the school thought younger kids would

be more accepting, Beloved started in kindergarten. He was an instant hit—tying shoes, opening juice boxes and leading a trail of tiny admirers, Pied-Piper-style, across the school yard at lunch. “He’s ours!” one delighted little boy said.

But Beloved was lonely. Seeing he needed friends closer to his age, Jennifer urged the school to put him with eighth-graders for religion, lunch and recess. In the car with Jennifer the day he joined the middle-schoolers, Beloved pumped his fist in the air. Of his feelings for Jennifer, he says, “I can’t explain. She’s right. She’s good. She’s my American mom.”

Soon after that, he started to come out of his shell. “Mari, I’m hungry,” he said one day, using his American “sister’s” name for the first time. Sometimes, he’d drive her crazy, snapping a photo as she emerged from the

bathroom wrapped in a towel. Gradually, though, “we totally bonded,” Mari says. “One time I got into a fight with my parents and was bawling. He knocked on my door and said, ‘What can I do to help you?’”

For the first time in his life, girls took an interest in him. He’d joke around with Mari’s pals, and became close friends with 14-year-old Bree Williams from school. They’d go for bike rides and swim in the ocean; once, they went to a monster-truck rally. “Give me some gum, please,” Beloved begged as they headed to the beach one day. “Nope, you’re not supposed to have any,” she replied, teasingly. “Thank you, Dr. Bree,” he shot back, rolling his eyes.

At times, he was as challenging as any American teen—and then some. Once, he was sent to the principal’s office after flipping the bird in school

“

He's changed on the inside and the outside. He's a new Beloved”

—BRIAN, BELOVED'S FRIEND



BACK HOME, APRIL 20:
“I tell people,” says Beloved
(in the family cooking hut),
“America is a beautiful place.”

(he didn't know what it meant), told a classmate to “shut up” and rarely said “please” or “thank you” despite Jennifer's coaching. “Here was this boy, testing limits—we had to be Mom and Dad,” Ted says. “One day I told him, ‘Get your iPod, your iMac and your Nintendo. Unless I see improvement,

I'm going to start taking things away.’” Beloved got the message.

On April 17, Jennifer, Ted, Beloved and the Operation of Hope team flew back to Zimbabwe. The next day, in a hallway in Harare Children's Hospital, 25 of Beloved's family and friends, dressed in their finest, erupted in

cheers when he entered. His pal Brian rushed him, and soon everyone was hugging, kissing, laughing, crying for joy. “God, you are great, you've done wonders,” they sang in Shona. Gina stroked her son's head. “Jenny was just like a good mother,” she said.

Now, back for a visit with the Trubensbachs in California, Beloved, at 17, seems a changed person. Looking a visitor straight in the eye, he talks about his life back home—bathing with a bucket, playing cards with his friends, flirting with girls. “When I was in Zimbabwe, one girl comes to see me,” he says. “I say, ‘I'm busy.’”

He laughs, lifting his cheeks way up in his version of a grin, revealing what almost appear to be dimples. And the boy once called Monster now says of his life, “It's good. Because I have a new face. Because it's a beautiful face.” ●



A MOTHER'S JOY,
APRIL 21: “I don't know
how to thank her,”
Beloved's mom, Gina,
says of Jennifer.



Know a hero? Send suggestions
to [HEROESAMONGUS@
PEOPLEMAG.COM](mailto:HEROESAMONGUS@PEOPLEMAG.COM)