

Bringing a smile to so many faces

 By [Nicci Botha](#)

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We salute all those healthcare workers fighting this pandemic, but it's important to remember those keeping the torch alight in other fields of medicine. Olivia Haslam is a volunteer nurse with Operation Smile, a non-profit organisation that travels to the most poverty-stricken parts of the globe, performing reconstructive surgery on facial deformities, particularly hare lips and cleft palates. She shares some of her experiences.



■ Tell us a bit about yourself

I am a registered nurse and have spent my entire career in the operating room assisting with either orthopaedic surgery or plastic surgery. I live in a small West Coast town called Darling but work at the Renaissance Surgical Clinic in Cape Town.

■ How did you get involved in Operation Smile

I worked at the Wellington Hospital in London from 1999 to 2003. One of the amazing surgeons I worked with, Brian Coghlan, was the medical director of Operation Smile UK at the time. He was heading to Mombasa on a mission and I jokingly asked why I couldn't go with. Within a few weeks, I was heading to Wales to do my paediatric advanced life support training and then onto Marrakesh, Morocco for my first Op Smile mission. After that I did a mission in India, then Kenya (with Brian – quite bittersweet as he was killed in a car accident in April 2003) where I met Natalie Miller who was a programme coordinator at the time. We became quite good friends and kept in touch. After that was Vietnam, and at that time I was moving back to SA. In 2005, Natalie asked if I could help her set up Op Smile SA (OSSA) and I jumped at the chance. She moved into my flat in Milnerton Ridge and I moved into my sister's spare room – Nat started OSSA from a corner of my sister's home office with a laptop and a mobile phone. It makes me incredibly proud to see how far we've come since then. By then I had trained to become a country coordinator and we started opening countries around Southern Africa – I stopped counting at 30 missions a few years ago and just consider myself lucky to have been there from the start – working with incredible people and helping change lives one smile at a time. I will continue to do what I can to ensure OSSA and all our wonderful patients get the quality care they deserve. It's an incredible privilege to be part of such an amazing organisation.

■ How has lockdown impacted on Operation Smile's work?

It has had quite a large impact on our work. Operation Smile International has put a stop to all missions worldwide until the

end of the year, however they are re-assessing monthly. I don't foresee anything going ahead this year, as there is a big anaesthetic risk with patients who might be Covid-19 positive, those who haven't been tested or are in the window. It's a significant risk for the anaesthesia provider and the nurses. I know that Operation Smile South Africa has put things in place where our OSSA students are going out and delivering care packages. We've also offered up our be available if anyone needs it. Hopefully, next year we'll be back to doing what we do and helping as many patients as we can.

■ ***Are there any missions or patients that stand out***

On our first mission in Antsirabe, Madagascar, we had a family that came to us. Two of the three kids had lips and palates and over the course of the next four missions and post-op follow-ups, they became like our mascot family. I took a photo of the family and the next time I saw them (six months later at follow-up) I gave it to the Dad in a nice frame. He welled up – completely blown away by the photo. I never even considered that something so simple like a photo in a frame could be such a prized possession and realised then that these are people that didn't have running water or electricity – it really humbled me. On the next mission, I was presented with hand-made baskets, frames and a hat. Also, the way the mom and dad couldn't afford shoes, but made sure the kids had or that they sold their small piece of land to pay for getting to and from the mission sites. And that the dad was the one who always came into theatre with the kids and we both cried on each other's shoulder every time. All making me realise how truly blessed we all are.

ABOUT NICCI BOTHA

Nicci Botha has been wordsmithing for more than 20 years, covering just about every subject under the sun and then some. She's strung together words on sustainable development, maritime matters, mining, marketing, medical, lifestyle... and that elixir of life - chocolate. Nicci has worked for local and international media houses including Primedia, Caxton, Lloyd's and Reuters. Her new passion is digital media.

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