

For An Orphan's Smile

A Brownsville woman loses her heart to a tiny Rwandan refugee.

by Paul Neville, Eugene Register-Guard.

Winnie Barron sat on the edge of what appeared to be an empty bed last fall as she visited with a nurse in the shambles of the hospital in Kibuye, Rwanda.

She leaned back and smoothed the blankets as she talked.

It was then that she saw the IV tube running under the blanket and realized with horror that the bed wasn't empty.

Barron pulled the blanket back and saw a set of huge, liquid eyes floating in the skin-covered skull of a 5-year-old girl.

The 37-year-old physician's assistant stared into the saddest, most beautiful eyes she had ever seen. Pus dripped from one of the girl's ears. Her 4-foot frame had withered to 18 pounds.

The girl let out a loud, pitiful whimper that stopped only when Barron covered her again with the blanket shroud. "My God," thought Barron. "If I ever see a smile on the lips of that kid, I will be forever blessed."

She moved on to the next patient. There were so many... But the memory of

the girl clung to her with every step. Barron didn't knot it, but she had just met the frail orphan who would become her life's passion.

It was late October when Barron, a Brownsville resident, received a phone call from Northwest Medical Teams, an international relief organization based in Portland. Did Barron want to join a seven-member team of a two-month mission to help the victims of ethnic violence in Rwanda?

Having long wanted to join such a mission, Barron arranged a leave from the Sweet Home clinic where she works. Three weeks later, she flew in to Rwanda where more than a million people had died in warring between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes.

By the time Barron arrived in the village of Kibuye near the border with Zaire, thousands of sick and wounded refugees had begun returning to their devastated homeland.

Many stopped in Kibuye, where Northwest Medical Teams had set up its operations in a hospital with no running water or electricity.

Just behind the building was a raw patch of bulldozed earth containing the bodies of 3,000 people. They had been lured by the promise of a religious celebration and then shot and shelled.

But such atrocities seemed distant and unreal as Barron walked each morning from a U.N. camp to the hospital. Brilliant wildflowers floated in fields that ran down to the sea of azure called Lake Kivu.

The reality of war returned as gunfire echoed from the hills and as she passed a makeshift church orphanage containing several hundred of the more than 100,000 Rwandan children who had lost parents – and often brothers and sisters – in the violence.

Barron felt like the Pied Piper whenever she passed the orphanage. Dozens of children poured out of the building, crying "muzungu (white person)."

They would follow her into the village, skipping and holding her hands, asking her for the biscuits she stuffed into her pockets.

There were orphans at the

hospital too, all of them suffering from severe malnutrition that had left them vulnerable to the ravages of cholera, dysentery, malaria and meningitis.

Clinging to life

It was on Barron's first day at the hospital that she encountered the little girl with the magical name of Myrrie Myirandorere who was awaiting death under a blanket.

The child was suffering from pneumonia, a massive blood infection and severe malnutrition. She drifted in and out of a coma and was tormented by hallucinations.

By all conventional medical wisdom, she should have been dead weeks earlier. But after two weeks of intensive treatment, Myrrie could sit up in her bed – but she always kept the blanket draped over her head.

Every time Barron walked past, she saw the two big eyes staring from deep within the cave of cloth. And every time their eyes met, the girl would let out her piercing wail.

A U.N. worker came to the hospital and told Barron how he had found the girl in a mountain village whose residents had been massacred weeks earlier.

When the worker went into one of the few houses left standing, he saw an entire family – mother and father, children, grandparents – lying in a swamp of blood.

He piled the bodies for removal and left. As he started to post a sign on the door, he heard a whimper.



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Myrrie Myirandorere peeks out pensively from her hospital bed in Kibuye, Rwanda, late last year

Myrrie, left, is ready for her bath. She weighs between 23 and 25 pounds, 10 pounds more than she weighed when Winnie first met her eight weeks before. She reached 26 pounds by the following week, when Winnie left Rwanda.



Near the bottom of the pile, he found a body that still harbored life – Myrrie Myirandorere.

A prayer answered

Although stretched to the limit caring for the flood of patients at the hospital, Barron found time daily to spend with the little girl.

Often Barron stopped by the child's bed and lifted the blanket from her head. When Myrrie would pull it back, Barron would lead over and gently speak the few Rwandan phrases she had learned.

"Murlo ho(good morning)," she would say. "Ahm a culu? (How are you?)"

After a couple of more weeks, Myrrie began to wait for the visits, sitting up in bed with the blanket drawn back just enough to keep watch for Barron.

Then one morning as Barron sat on Myrrie's bed, the girl suddenly reached up and hugged Barron's neck. Then she pulled herself up and onto the woman's back, resting her tiny rear end inside the open rucksack that Barron wore on her rounds.

Stunned, Barron turned to look at the girl peering over her shoulder.

There, under the huge eyes, was the smile the physician's assistant had prayed to see.

"Another heartbreak?"

That day – and every day for the rest of the medical team's stay – Myrrie made the rounds at the hospital with Winnie Barron, feet dangling through the backpack straps, fingers toying with Barron's hair or with her string necklace on which hung a tiny silver bell.

But Myrrie's health remained perilous. She threw up the tiny amount of food she ate, and she gained little weight.

Using a nurse as an interpreter, Barron asked the girl what her favorite food was.

"Eggs," Myrrie said.

From that day on, Barron cornered the market on eggs in the village marketplace. Every morning, she would buy up every egg she could find, cook them on a camp stove and feed them to Myrrie and the hospital's other orphans.

Barron had been trying to get Myrrie to say Winnie, her first name. But she needn't have bothered. Myrrie promptly gave Barron a new name, one she greeted her by each morning: "eggs."

After four or five weeks, Myrrie's weight nearly doubled. Sometimes she would go outside the hospital and play in the wildflowers with the other children from the hospital. There were times Barron even thought she heard the little girl giggle.

Myrrie soon became healthy enough to be sent to a U.N. feeding center several hours' drive to the south. But Barron arranged to keep her at the hospital, wanting to continue personally nursing her back to health – but also unwilling to release her to the uncertainties that awaited an orphan in a ravaged land.

While carrying Myrrie on her rounds, Barron was struck one morning by the realization that the medical team was scheduled to leave in only three weeks and that she would be forced to leave Myrrie behind.

"My God," she thought as she felt the little girl's hands on her neck. "What have I done to this girl? What's going to happen to her when I leave? Can she survive another heartbreak?"

Sorrow and frustration

Barron quietly began to work out a plan. She knew there was no possibility of tak-

ing Myrrie with her but resolved to do everything possible to adopt the orphan after she returned home.

The day of parting came sooner than expected. A dentist working with Barron suffered a severe head injury in a car accident, and the medical team had to pull out early to rush him to facilities where he could receive surgery.

Barron had only 30 minutes' notice. Along with the rest of the medical team, Barron took their blankets, food and supplies, and delivered them to the orphanage.

Then she ran back to the hospital and bedside of Myrrie Myirandorere.

For the first few minutes, Barron played the blanket game as if they had all the time in the world. "Hi, munchkin," she said. She slipped the necklace with the silver bell from her neck and pit it on Myrrie, tucking it under her shirt so the other children's wouldn't try to take it.

Then Barron leaned forward and kissed the girl on the nose. "I have to go away for a while," she said. "I want you to keep this for me. And I want you to eat lots of eggs and be happy."

The little girl smiled one last time.

"Eggs," she said.

Barron cried all the way to Nairobi. She cried again in frustration when a customs officer in London confiscated a vial of Myrrie's blood that Barron had taken with her for testing in the hopes of speeding the adoption process.

It would not be her last frustration.

Barron immediately began work on her plan, contacting international adoption agencies for help in adopting Myrrie. But the agencies told her Rwandan children were off-limits because of the region's

ongoing violence and political uncertainties.

She spent hours on long-distance phone calls, pleading with representatives of Rwanda's new government. But she was told all orphans would remain in the country – no exceptions.

When she contacted U.S. State Department officials and even members of Congress, she was informed that there was no chance of adoption. Wait until the region stabilizes... maybe then, some said.

But Barron knew all too well that "maybe then" might be too late for such a frail girl in such a fearful land.

Message in a dream

To make matters worse, there was no way of knowing Myrrie's location, her condition or even if she was still alive.

No phone. No mail. Nothing.

Barron tried everything she could think of to make contact with Myrrie. She sent messages through contacts in Burundi, Zaire and Kenya but to no avail.

When she tried to sign up for another relief sting in Rwanda with a different agency, her application was rejected because they needed full-fledged physicians.

Although they were thousands of miles apart, Myrrie was a presence in Barron's home.

The girl's name was printed in large letters on a marker board in the kitchen. And there was a photograph taken shortly after Barron's arrival that showed the girl with a sheet draped over her tiny head, her eyes brimming with tears.

A friend on the medical team sent another set of pic-

tures that showed Winnie and Myrrie together shortly before they parted. In them, the girl is smiling in the arms of the woman who had nursed her back to life.

As the months passed and doors to adoption closed, Barron began to ask herself hard questions about how much of her desire to bring Myrrie home to a strange, far-away Brownsville was for Winnie Barron's well-being rather than Myrrie's.

Perhaps it was an attempt to ease the pain of their separation, but Barron began to reflect on how happy the recovering girl had been with playing with friends at the hospital and with the Rwandan nurses.

Gradually, Barron began to formulate a new plan.

She would save her money and return as soon as she could to Rwanda, not necessarily to adopt Myrrie – although she still would if she could – but more importantly to find her, to make certain Myrrie was well and happy and loved.

As if in confirmation came a dream in the middle of a recent night. In it, Myrrie was riding on Barron's back, toying with her hair, reaching into her pockets.

The little girl was happy – smiling and singing. Then she leaned over and whispered Barron's name.

"Eggs," she said.



Winnie Barron gets a hug from Myrrie Myrindorere shortly before her return to Oregon.



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