

God Uses Talents and Kindness of Strangers to Save A 12-year-old Girl

By Larry Price, North Kingstown UMC

In a world of religious strife, the Lord has used the kindness and talents of strangers from many faiths to marshal a miracle in providing life-saving heart surgery for a Muslim child half-a-world away.

12-year old Saffiatu Bah from Sierra Leone, West Africa, finally had a second chance at life in March when surgeons repaired two faulty valves and a hole in her heart at a hospital in Israel. Saffiatu's story can best be summed up in the words of that great hymn, *Pass It On*: "It only takes a spark to get a fire going ... that's how it is with God's love."



Saffiatu's condition was first diagnosed in the summer of 2005 at her home town of Kabala, Sierra Leone at the NarSarah Clinic, operated by Cranston, Rhode Island residents Daniel and Dorcas Kamanda. Dorcas also grew up in Kabala and founded CITA International, a charity that supports the clinic which provides basic health care in the remote rural town. Dorcas related Saffiatu's plight in the weekly bulletin of the North Kingstown, Rhode Island United Methodist Church where she and Daniel are members. The spark had been struck.

(BEFORE AND AFTER MEDICAL TREATMENT – Above left, Saffiatu in poor health as photographed in West Africa in November 2005. Above right, photo taken in Israel in February after weeks of medical attention and just prior to her surgery, shows a smiling and healthier Saffiatu – a striking difference. Saffiatu is now recovering from surgery.)

When 11-year old Samantha Dallas read the item, she told her mother Lisa, "Saffiatu should not have to suffer because of where she was born. If she lived here, she would have had surgery by now and would be playing with her friends." Samantha's caring wisdom touched her family's heart. Lisa, mother of four daughters -- including Samantha's twin sister Abbey, Carly 8 and Grace 4 -- and her husband Jeff decided to do something about it.



The embers from the spark were starting to ignite.

Lisa began making phone calls, searching the internet, and sending emails in an effort to secure the life-saving heart surgery Saffiatu needed. The North Kingstown UMC congregation began responding with donations, and The Rev. Beverly Stenmark, pastor of the church, approached her flock about using a few thousand dollars -- what was remaining from a fund that had been raised a few years ago to provide successful liver surgery for Fiona Halstead, another child in the congregation -- as seed money to start a new fund to pay for Saffiatu's travel, surgery and medical care. The church's administrative council agreed unanimously.



After months of difficult -- at times frustrating work, cutting through red tape and securing passports -- Lisa located, through Save A Child's Heart foundation, a hospital willing to accept Saffiatu for evaluation for the heart surgery. A doctor accepted Saffiatu's case despite the fact the most basic of routine heart examinations could not be secured in her native country. The fate of the Muslim child would now be decided by physicians at a hospital in the Jewish state of Israel -- if the congregation of a Christian church in Rhode Island could raise the money needed.



As the summer stretched into autumn and winter, the North Kingstown congregation raced against time and Saffiatu's deteriorating health to raise the estimated \$25,000 needed for Saffiatu's travel, medical care and surgery. They made homemade bracelets and Valentine cards which were offered for donations at the church, in local schools, and at tables outside a local supermarket. The fund

drive depended on the kindness of strangers. A man taking a large jar of coins to the supermarket to exchange them for paper money at the store's coin changer, instead gave the money to Saffiatu's fund. It totaled at least \$80.

The fire was going.

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Israeli hospital new destination for girl in need of heart operation

the church website www.nkumcri.com. The church secured enough donations from a generous public and congregation to pay for Saffiatu and her mother to travel to Israel for a medical evaluation; but more money was needed. Jeff Dallas' employer responded with a generous donation. The church's youth group began planning work projects for sponsors.

By now, the local news media – newspapers and television stations – had begun picking up the story from church news releases and updates on

An 8-year old boy in the congregation, Hudson Reynolds, came up with the idea to ride his bike for 16-miles to collect donations from sponsors. Hudson, his sister Miriah and mom, Melody, and Lisa Dallas and her twin girls, finished their ride on a cold February Saturday, just hours before a huge snow storm blanketed the state. A local toy store donated 10 per cent of its day's receipts to the cause. Teachers at Hudson's school donated their "casual dress Friday fund" and gave Hudson scores of balloons to mark the site of his ride. Another perfect stranger stopped by prior to the bike ride and said while he couldn't ride with Hudson, he had a check for him. When the donations had been collected, Hudson stood before the congregation on a Sunday morning and reported he and his friends had raised over \$1,700 for Saffiatu. The fire was now glowing.



On February 7th, after enduring more than 16 hours of air travel connections, Saffiatu finally arrived in Israel to undergo medical evaluation. Her condition was worse than expected. In addition to the hole in her heart, the young child had two faulty heart valves which were leaking. She was suffering from jaundice and weak. The congregation was worried, but could only wait and pray. The child's fate was in the hands of skilled doctors and the Lord. Prayer, patience and serenity was needed as several anxious weeks passed with little news on the condition of a little girl whom all but two in the church congregation had never met, yet held close to their hearts.

Finally, in March, word came in an email to Lisa Dallas. Surgeons had successfully repaired Saffiatu's heart. Saffiatu was recovering in intensive care, and while she faced a long recovery period, the first critical step had been taken. She would have the best chance of a full recovery.

The church is celebrating by sending "get well" cards to Saffiatu, and encouraging people of faith everywhere to look for ways to serve the Lord by helping others. In her weekly sermon on the weekend following Saffiatu's surgery, Pastor Beverly Stenmark encouraged the congregation. "Each of us has the same 24 hours in every day," she preached. "The world is quick to tell us how to fill those 24 hours, just as the world was quick to tell Jesus what was important from their perspective. One of the lessons we can learn in the wilderness is not to let others tell us who we are and what is important. Let us use this time (Lent) to discover or rediscover our priorities in life."

Yes, Saffiatu's story is best summed up in the words of that hymn, "It only takes a spark to get a fire going, and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing. That's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it; you spread His love to everyone; you want to pass it on."