Buenos Noches todo el mundo!

I am writing my first Blog email to you flying somewhere near the equator at 35,000 feet. So far, our journey is going well. After a 10 ½ hour flight, we should land in Buenos Aires around 9:30AM.

Before we show up at the mission site, allow me to tell you why I am blogging this trip.

As was the case last year on our trip and blog, we were able to share with you the emotion that comes from serving these children who have such need. I have concluded a very important concept that I think will not only help me with our responsibilities with Opsmile but also in life. On my last email, I shared with you the photos of one of these children. It’s so easy for us to use reason to come up with the conclusion that they need help….but reason only leads to conclusions; it is our emotion which leads us to action. I believe the more opportunities I have to share these mission efforts with you through stories and personal experiences, the more honestly I can share with you the emotion that leads to change. Opsmile’s mission statement is “we change the world one smile at a time”.

Many of you were on the blog in September of 2006. For those of you who are new to my Operation Smile mission Blog…welcome. I would especially like to welcome the girls in Mrs. Allen’s health science class at Davie County High School and also the newly formed Operation Smile Club at Davie County High School.

So, let’s begin with what Operation Smile is calling the World Journey of Smiles! As we arrived in Dallas today, we quickly ran into other Opsmile volunteers. We all shared our personal experiences and talked about the mission ahead. It was a neat feeling realizing that 1700 volunteers worldwide are in the air heading to the 43 mission sites in 25 countries. I couldn’t help but think about the children who are most likely making their way to the various mission sites. Last year we heard stories of children and parents walking 55 + miles to make the mission. In Paraguay, as well as the other countries, word is spreading about the amazing changes that Operation Smile has made.

The flavor on the flight is very South American…you hear lots of Spanish. Our goal is to catch some zzzzs around midnight and wake up early before landing to have some breakfast and arrive in Buenos Aires and then about a two hour flight over to Asuncion, Paraguay.

I hope you will share in the emotion that is getting ready to take place. As the web permits, I will periodically send some photos of the kids. Thank you for your interest in Opsmile and a big thank you to those of you who made donations to Operation Smile before we left. I am excited to see the fruits of the Blog!
A special thanks to my mother and father for taking care of our children, Ashton & Lewis while we are away. (We love you guys) That is the toughest part of being away, but our kids too understand the significance of helping change lives.

Kyle Swicegood
Mocksville Rotary Club

November 7th 12:00 Noon Buenos Aires Time

Well, a good night’s rest on the plane?…no; but nevertheless we did get some sleep. All in all it was a good flight. Unfortunately, TAM airlines rescheduled our connection and as we were taxiing to the terminal, our flight to Asuncion, Paraguay was backing out. We had to stay in the terminal an additional six hours.

4:50 Paraguayan time
We arrived at the Asuncion Airport and after going thru customs, we were greeted by the in-country volunteers. We took the crazy drive to our lodging, dodging trucks and donkey drawn carriages. Rough roads and beggars were once again lining the streets.

We arrived at the hotel at 6:15 and finally got a shower after 32 hours of travel. One of the most exciting parts of an Opsmile Mission Trip is the initial team meeting. There were 45 of us in the room. We were briefed on Thursday’s activities and then we had an opportunity to introduce ourselves and find out who was going to be our new best friends for the next two weeks. This years’ group is represented by the following countries & states: California, Phoenix, Michigan, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Virginia, Washington, DC, Florida, Ohio, México, Colombia, SA, Sydney, Australia, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina.

Our team coordinator informed us that we should expect 450 children to be screened over the next two days! Our plans are to meet for breakfast in the morning at 6AM and be at the site by 6:45. We are both excited yet nervous about the big day ahead. I will look forward to emailing you Thursday night about our first day! See you then….hopefully with photos.

Kyle Swicegood
Mocksville Rotary Club
Thursday November 8th 8:51PM

Well, day one of the World Journey of Smiles is over. We met at 5:45 AM this morning and were transported to the hospital at 6:30. Like last year, strangers only 12 hours earlier had a complete hospital mission set up by 8:00AM. The statistic that 200,000 children are born with a cleft lips or palates each year was amplified today. Standing in line, children with mothers’ & fathers, or grandparent and siblings; 189 children made their way through the screening process. Elizabeth handled records and translation and I took photos of the children; frontal, side profiles and a basal view. You could see despair, yet hope in each of their faces.

I especially enjoyed seeing some of the children who were showing up for follow up visits. The last time I saw these children was in September, 2006 on the last day of the mission. Their parents greeted Elizabeth & I with a lot of excitement and welcomed us back to Paraguay. Seeing the healed wounds from last year was the first face to face proof of Operation Smiles’ life changing work.

I can’t say enough about the medical staff working in Paraguay. They are great!

Because we are beat, we are calling it a night!

Kyle Swicegood
Mocksville Rotary Club
Screening is over! We have seen 300 plus kids. Our turnout today was hampered somewhat by the weather. We have had 10 inches of rain in the last 24 hours. Asuncion doesn’t have good storm drainage. Our bus drove in about 2.5 feet of water to take us from the hospital. Nevertheless, as I am writing my email, the sun has come out and the day is ending peaceably and with a lot of satisfaction.

Today, we saw more cleft palates than we did yesterday. Some only have a pin-hole into the nasal cavity while others literally have openings from their cleft lip all the way to their throats. One mother came through the line near the end of the day. She had lost three children. The one month old she brought today had a terrible cleft palate and lip. It was so bad that the baby simply could not suck her milk. She was losing 50% of what she was drinking. The optimum age for surgery is a minimum of four months. These are the ones we talk about every afternoon on the bus ride back to the hotel. Sad…so sad.

As I am typing, the doctors and chief nurses are doing the hard job…they are auditing all the files and putting them in priority. Who will get operated on and who will not. Unlike last years mission, we expect to be able of operate on about 90% of our patients.

One difference in this mission and last years mission is the number of 15 year old plus patients. These are always the ones that really break your heart. The children…they really don’t know any better. When they become older, they have been made fun of, hidden and they have to face themselves in a mirror everyday. You never see these people smiling.

Finally, let me tell you about our dining last night. A local doctor recommended that we eat at a restaurant called Westfalia. About 16 of us took taxis over to eat. Get this…this tax was 60,000 Guarani Dollars and the meal which was incredible was 117,000 Guarani Dollars. All total, about $35…ride and all. Paraguay is known for its beef and now I understand why.

Take a look at some of today’s’ patients in the attachments. Photo 33 will possibly disturb you.

Kyle Swicegood
Mocksville Rotary Club
Yes, it’s late, and believe it or not, we are getting up in 1 hour and 42 minutes!!

This evening we enjoyed the company of Alejandro Conti. Alejandro is the Chief Executive Officer for ESSO Corporation (Exxon gas company) in Paraguay. He is also the chairman of the Board for Opsmile Paraguay. We enjoyed a festive evening at his hacienda! I could tell you lots about Alejandro from a financial standpoint, but let me tell you something more important. He sees the big picture. He could very easily live the good life...and I mean the good life. However, last year and again this year, you will find him at the mission site finding ways to help!

I will also tell you about an in-country doctor, Oscar Gonzales. He told us “the reason I offer my services for free to Opsmile is because I knew that my heart needs to continue to grow”. There is something to be said about someone who realizes their own need to expand their gift to humanity. I will agree with Oscar...these mission field expands your heart and cause you to be stretched. In retrospect, each of the volunteers are better able to go back into their regular environment with a more service attitude.

This afternoon, Liz and I enjoyed the company of Jeanine and Wolf Von Bothmer. Wolf is a Rotarian I met last year in Asuncion. We talked about the matching grant that The Rotary Club of Mocksville is doing with the Asuncion Club. Last year we sat on his back porch and dream up a matching grant for Opsmile. That dream has helped raised over $70,000 for Opsmile or Paraguay. This money will be used to create a full time in-country location for Opsmile.

I shall go now I we are departing to Brazil to see the Iguazu Falls in about 1 hour and ½.

Kyle Swicegood
Mocksville Rotary Club
November 12, 4:15 AM

Look at the difference one year can make…These photos are 14 months apart. He is here for a free check up

November 12, 9:14 PM

Well, first allow me to tell you about our day off! We were picked up by Ameliano (taxi driver) at 4 AM. We drove 5 hours thru Ciudad de Este into Brazil to the Iguazu Falls. I recently visited Niagara Falls and thought this would be another water fall. The falls consist of 275 different falls over a 2.5 mile width: very impressive. We arrived at 9 AM and traveled back to the mission hotel at 6 PM in time for our pre-surgery team meeting.

As of today around 7 PM, The Opsmile’s World Journey of Smiles has screened over 7,000 kids World Wide. There was applause from our group when Latin American Coordinator Beth Marshall announced this news. We all felt part of something very big and very right! When we leave Paraguay on Saturday, I am convinced that we will be leaving this place changed. Here in Asuncion, or small villages around the capital there will be a new breath of hope that will change the world for the better. Word’s cannot describe the emotion that is apparent among the team.

Tomorrow morning we will began our first day of surgery. We have four plastic doctors. We will begin at 6 AM est. and end by 5:00 PM est. if all things go well. We will begin our day with a mock surgery identified as a “CODE RED”. This is a simulation surgery in the event a child is “crashing and burning” according to one Doctor. It made me realize how serious each patient’s surgery really is.

So, to end tonight’s email, I’d like to ask each of you to pray for the children and young adults that are resting tonight before their big change tomorrow. I would ask that you pray for the patients, doctors, nurses, anesthetist, volunteers and the families of the children.

I appreciate your continued interest. And thank you for those who have emailed me concerning donations. This non profit is the real deal!

Kyle Swicegood
Mocksville Rotary Club
Day one of surgeries over! What a long day. I walked into the child life specialist area for a moment and saw the grim looks on the parents' face. They were, with somewhat blind faith, talking their kids on a walk of faith. You could say they were being asked to “walk on water”. The language barrier compounds this scene.

One of the many heart wrenching things that happen to day took place around 9:30 AM. Karen Kreimer, Child life specialist was asked by a lady representing Opsmile to take some photos of us that are scheduled to be on Fox news out of Greensboro Tuesday night at 5/6 or 11. We were asked to select a child. I saw one by herself in the corner of the room. So Elizabeth picked her up and carried her to an end of a hallway for photos. The child we selected we were informed was abandoned, orphaned and the product of a local prostitute. She was a cute little one year old. She is at present being cared for by a lady who is going to adopt her. I couldn't help but think about that little girl all day long. I followed her all the way thru surgery into post-op. This is just one story of the thirty five kids who were operated on today.

I must admit, my batteries are running low. Home is knocking hard on my heart. We will be returning home seven days from tonight around 11:30...home in time for Thanksgiving. I am already celebrating in my heart. We have so much to be thankful for.

PS The camera is out of battery too, I will send some tomorrow.

Kyle Swicegood
Mocksville Rotary Club
What we call “hump day” has passed. We have now provided over 115 procedures and we have two days left. I honestly feel like we are in the middle of boot camp in a way. What we are doing provides soon much emotional satisfaction while at the same time it is incredibly taxing on the body.

Yesterday we worked on two special people, both were older patients. They walked into the OR with a huge smile on their deformed faces. Both had been to post-op and seen the transformation of the younger children. Due to a lack of resources, one was operated on with a local anesthesia rather than oxygen. He had a huge unilateral lip. The doctor would ask him to move this way or that way. Although the Doctor indicated he didn’t like using a local for such a procedure, what he did in 1 hour was magnificent. What a change. This was changed in a way that his mother and father… if they are living, will see a new son. This case was especially exciting. Elizabeth was offered the opportunity to leave records for the afternoon and watch a few procedures. We haven’t seen each other during the day all week. She enjoyed that opportunity.

On a public relations front, I was invited to the Rotary Club of Asuncion to speak last night. First, they meet at 8:30 PM. US Rotarians will tell you that that is unusually late; but this is South America…they eat late suppers. Elizabeth translated for me and did a nervously excellent job. I thanked them for their support of this mission. They were very hospitable. The president of the club insisted that we stay the rest of the week at his house…but we graciously declined.

We are now heading to the hospital for our last full day. Friday will be a very light day as we see the end in sight. We received an embossed invitation to the United States Embassy’s Ambassador’s personal residences tonight for a meal and hospitality. I am excited about this, however it will make for another long night. We got back last night at 11:30PM.

I now see my reunion with my kids and parents insight. My heart has practically exploded with the emotion of I expected on this trip. I feel so good about the work that each person has done here. I truly feel each hand has created a difference in so many lives. …Sorry to ramble…but yesterday I visited post-op for a few times. I got to see the job I did last year. There is nothing like seeing mother’s being reunited with their babies…those tears of joy were overcoming to all of us.

See you soon.
Kyle Swicegood
Mocksville Rotary Club
Our adrenaline has been moving us since about Tuesday evening. That has been carrying us. Today was our last full day. We only have a half day of patients tomorrow. People who were mere strangers one week ago have been brought together with purpose and now call each other close friends. We have participated in a challenging two weeks that has made not only an impact of so many children and adults with deformities, but a huge impact on each other that each of us will carry for our lifetime. Let me share two stories with you about today. It was the first day I broke down and cried. Two much emotion was bottled up that needed to be released.

We admitted a 24 year old patient. She walked into the OR and gracefully laid down on the operating table. As I was covering her up with sheets and the anesthesiologist placed the cup over her mouth, she push the cup back and said with her disfigured mouth, “hoy es mi cumpleaños”...today is my birthday. The anesthesiologist and I both said “Feliz Cumpleaños” ..happy birthday. She smiled with a toothy unattractive smile and then accepted the breathing cup. In a matter of minutes, she was out like a light. Usually I have been in and out of the operating room; but during her surgery I felt compelled to hang around. I so bad wanted to see her have a successful operation. As has been my obligation all week, when the doctors were completed and before the patients were “brought back” for their anesthesia, I took photos. When I saw the girls face, I knew that she was going to receive the greatest birthday gift of her life. I carried her to Post OP and about knock a nurse down trying to find the mirror. There, for the first time, she saw a lip that closed. With her mouth being too numb to smile, her pride was holding back smiles of tears from her eyes. Then...all the Post Op nurses and I sang Happy Birthday in Spanish. The first words to that song must have been a key that unlocked the doors of so much emotion. This young lady will probably go back to her village and we will never see each other again. One thing I am certain about; she nor I will never forget the day she turned 25.

Another story; Sandra, who has been the janitor at the hospital this week has done an exceptional job. Without request, she would deliver espresso and clean up after our mess. My counterpart...Rodrigo came to me at three today indicating that she would not be coming to work with us on Friday because of test for an impending surgery on Monday. Her surgery is for a kidney problem. Rodrigo, a 6’2”, 270 Paraguayan recommended to me that we take up a collection for Sandra. She makes around $50 per week. Her surgery was expected to be in the $1000 range. She was making arrangement to cover the cost over time. After speaking to
every team member, we were able to raise over $400.00 for Sandra. We gave her the money and she became overcome with her emotions. Then I look at Rodrigo, with tears in his Paraguayan eyes he said “thanks…this means so much to me; what you have done for Sandra,” In Rotary International, we call it service above self!

What a day!

There are so many more stories but it is late.

Kyle Swicegood
Mocksville Rotary Club
The writer of Mark in the Bibles says, “He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

I thought often about this scripture in the recent days.

Today the dam holding back the emotional tears broke. It broke for three reasons.

First, we said good bye to all the children and their parents. We did our rounds near the end of the day. I understand why they call this Operation Smile…the patients were smiling, their parents were smiling…everyone was smiling. 160 procedures in 5 days. The team is completely exhausted. We have focus so hard on caring for the patients; we didn’t really realize how we were suppressing all of the strong feelings. Before our eyes we have witnessed changes. Family life has now made a change; village life has made a change. Who knows what these children will now we able to do or become; possibly they can do some of the things like other people with repaired lips and palates like Payton Manning, Jesse Jackson or Tom Brokaw. Yes, someone took care of these guys at an early age, and now look at them.

Second, the friendships we have made in Paraguay. As a Patient Imaging Technician, I was able to work closely with three in- country guys. At our farewell party last night, Rodrigo Morro came up to me and said “thank you for helping our poor children in Paraguay.” Then he reached in his pocket and handed me a gift that was wrapped in white typing paper. On the outside of the gift, he wrote “to my new American Brother, Kyle”. Two grown men exchanged embraces and we endured a moment of sadness at our farewell. Another little 20 year old nurse Practioner came to us and offered a set of lace ear rings to Lizzy and a key chain to me. Something told me that she couldn’t afford the gifts…which made their offering so special. 45 + - people were thrown together ten days ago into a situation that strained them emotionally and physically. We were bound together by a desire to help others. In the end, we realized that we all gained more from this mission than we were able to give. I will be leaving this place on Saturday with a greater understanding of self, and a realization of how small our world is.

Finally, I am homesick, we long to see our children so much. Although I have made some wonderful friends in Paraguay, Bolivia, Australia, Canada, Columbia, Argentina, Panama and Israel, they are no match to my family back home. My parents have been very gracious keeping Ashton and Lewis for us.

So ends our World Journey of Smiles. It has impacted us both greatly. I appreciate your interest and the emails you have sent.

Kyle Swicegood
Mocksville Rotary Club