The Story of Mamou, a Work in Progress

We hope you enjoyed the story of Mamou the Magnificent. It marks a significant anniversary for us: 20 years of service to thousands of children from scores of countries all around the world. And 20 years of faithful support from all of you—that which makes it all possible.

Truly, there is magnificence in Mamou's story—in her small person and in her enormous spirit; in the small acts of love that marked her healing journey and in the enormous idea that yes, it’s possible to change the world, one Mamou at a time.

It’s a blessing to do this work, and it’s a blessing to be able to thank all of you for believing and giving, for supporting the small acts of love and the enormous idea.

It’s a blessing to know that you’ll continue to do all those things.

A high hand to you! You are magnificent!

We know that she’d run away once in an airport and multiple times on the planes. As we looked at this tiny six-year-old, as small as some toddlers, knowing her left arm was bound to her side through scarring, that most of her scalp had received burns as well as her back and right arm, we were just amazed at her spirit and energy. We soon came to be amazed at her speed.

That night, after we told her our names, Mamou immediately put “Mamma” in front of mine. When we explained that Steve was Missy and Jackie’s daddy, “Daddy” went in front of his. In Mamou’s mind, MommaKem was at the top and everyone else was at the next level.

There was no higher authority to Mamou than MommaKem, and she reminded our girls of this constantly. Bent to her side, looking up at them with her left fist on her hip and waving the pointed finger of her right hand at them, shoulders swinging, she would tell them, “You no MommaKem!” When I returned home, I’d receive what we call “the full report” from Mamou in one long phonetically learned sentence. “MommaKem JoAnn say…Mamou say…JoieAnn say…”

We decided Mamou’s philosophy was “It’s harder to hit a moving target.” She didn’t stop until she curled up where she was and slept a short time when I’d turn her to her bed. Then she’d be up and at it again. A wonderful person, Jackie Cain, a retired French teacher, came the next day to stay with us to help communicate with Mamou. We found out that Mamou did speak French, but this was intertwined with an African language. Jackie also learned more about her family in Burkina Faso and Cote d’Ivoire and found out what Mamou had been told about this trip. Mamou would stop, stand up as straight as she could, and point into the distance, saying, “Vous irez à la terre blanche et aurez un momma blanc pour vous rendre fort.” Roughly I understand this as, “You are going to where there are many white people and have a white momma to help you get strong again.” But mainly we all watched Mamou spinning, running, dancing, and singing in a very high-pitched voice over and over, not necessarily in that order. Mamou literally ran along the top of the back of our sofa before we could catch her. Steve got the camera to record the action, and we have a picture of a very tired-looking MommaKem and Mademoiselle Cain, with a blur that is Mamou.

The Story of Mamou. The Magnificent

20 years of healing …

c’est magnifique!

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Over the next few days we learned a lot about Mamou and the young twins raising her. We learned that Mamou had been taught not to spit to us, and then line them up on the sink. We learned that Mamou had never brushed her teeth, and almost all of her baby teeth had cavities. She had multiple abscessed teeth and had to have oral surgery before she could begin her surgeries at Shriners. A very kind and excellent pediatric dentist and oral surgeon, Dr. Robert Ross, arranged this for us.

It was done at St. Luke's Hospital, and Mamou was a new field for next day. So much of her behavior had probably been in response to the pain she had in her little mouth. She could tolerate cool and cold things for the first time, and she told us that her ears didn’t hurt when she jumped up and down or chewed her food.

Mamou’s doctor at Shriners is Dr. Jennifer Butterfield, and she was wonderful from the beginning. She got down low and spoke directly to Mamou and would listen to her carefully. In Mamou’s new English and vocabulary, Dr. Butterfield became “Dr. Butterfly” and is still Dr. Butterfly at the hospital, to us, and in Burkina Faso as well. We still needed to translate some then for Mamou, so I brought pictures of her aunt and some of her favor things to do and eat so she could tell about herself, too. Dr. Butterfly let Mamou tell her about sausaaaaaad and chicken and her friends. After two rounds of surgeries, she has given Mamou a strong arm, five digits that work perfectly and a beautiful axilla (underarm).

We prepared her for plastic surgery as best we could in French and English, and the liaison in Burkina spoke with her in her home language, but it’s still a very scary thing. Mamou would tell us, “Is OK, Mamou no more oouchie.” We had to explain to her that there would be a BIG oouchie first, then no more oouchie. The donor sites are a huge oouchie, and the kids that deal with this are always just unbelievable to me. All through Mamou’s dressing changes and therapy over the next few months, she finally drew the line when they were adding a set of wings to their ensembles.

In time, as Mamou settled down in kindergarten, the constant danca’ began to disappear, but not totally. After her bath or getting ready for bed are still major danca’ times. While I was brushin’ her teeth in the morning getting ready for kindergarten, I was explaining to her that there are times when she shouldn’t danca’. She held her upper body still, then looked up at me and said, “Oh MommaKem, my bottom, it danca’!” while her lower half wiggled.

Steve takes Mamou to the nursing homes with him once a month for rounds, as he did with JoieAnn and Missa’a. One of the ladies gave Mamou a dress-up stuffed bear she had and asked her to name it. Mamou was thinking, and when the woman, named Helen, suggested naming the bear “Hele,” Mamou shouted, “Yes, HelenSalan!”

Now we have HelenSalan, a beautiful bear in a long pouffy pink dress with a tiara and a ring of flowers with a veil in the back, but finally drew the line when they were adding a set of wings to their ensembles.

From the beginning Mamou loved playing dress up. Shortly after Mamou came, Christine’s family became an HTC Host family for Stephanie, a little girl from Liberia also being treated at Shriners. With all the scarves, old prom dresses and hats draped over their tiny mini-bodies they enter a different world and are beautiful. Mamou believes a girl can’t have on too many crowns, boas, and butterfly wings! Mamou has a scarf holding a baby doll to her back dressed like this, and off she goes around the neighborhood. JoieAnn was married this past June, and the girls were in the wedding. She let them pick out their poofly dresses with rose petals, for them a tiara and a ring of flowers with a veil in the back, but finally drew the line when they were adding a set of wings to their ensembles.

Our family thinks Mamou’s story is a “magnificent” one, but we know all the HTC children have amazing people in their lives who loved them enough to get them the care they need. We think of their stories. We think of Biba, who was at the free clinic regarding another child when a doctor overheard her and asked if he could please find Mamou and see if HTC could help her. The doctor had been involved on with Mamou’s case and even though nothing more could be done for her at the clinic, she didn’t want to give up, because she told Biba, “Mamou is a special child.” She hadn’t seen Mamou for some time, but gave Biba an old address. When Biba returned to the clinic with Mamou in two weeks, she found that the doctor had suddenly passed away. My family thinks often of this young woman physician from the Congo and the part she played in Mamou’s life. We think of Mamou’s young aunt who didn’t give up on Mamou and said no to the first doctors who wanted to amputate Mamou’s arm. We have so much respect for her courage. We think of Biba, who listened and acted and kept trying. After Mamou stayed at her home for a short time, her husband told her, “Biba, we might not be able to help this one,” but Biba knew they had to. We think of Mamou’s escort, Masako Doi (and sometimes we laugh until we cry!), who won an Airline Ambassador International escort of the year award for bringing her. We think of our director, Helen Salan, who looked at the small picture Biba sent, said yes, and then made it happen. We think of Dr. Butterfly, who gave Mamou her “high hand,” and we think how happy her colleague from the Congo must be.

This is Mamou’s story. Surely she has been touched by the magnificent work of Healing the Children.