

Braces and More for Polio Survivors in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Jay Nash worked as a Peace Corps volunteer in the 1970s in what was then Zaire and is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). That was when he first encountered many people crawling on the ground or limping around on paralyzed legs—as well as a few who had braces and crutches—and learned that polio was the cause.

There has not been a confirmed case of acute poliomyelitis in the DRC since the year 2000, according to the Global Polio Initiative. The country remains vigilant though, as there are still polio outbreaks in neighbouring countries.

Africa presents unique obstacles for those who can't walk. In the DRC, streets are usually unpaved, muddy and full of people's rubbish and sewage, so just staying clean is a continual challenge.

There are many children, youth and some adults living with varying degrees of paralysis. Parents of children with disabilities are rarely able to pay for the extra treatment and equipment their children require to achieve maximum mobility.

Over the years and while working for the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in Lubumbashi, DRC, Nash assisted a few young people to obtain the equipment they needed, but there was so much more to be done.

On a visit to the capitol of the DRC, Kinshasa, he encountered a friend with a disability who had just completed formal training in brace making but who remained without a

job. Nash opened a brace shop in his garage in Lubumbashi, and his friend began to craft new braces and to train new apprentices/assistants from those with disabilities. A second brace shop followed at a friend's house in Kinshasa in 1999.

Soon, more and more kids with polio began showing up and staying at the two houses during their pre-bracing treatment, brace-fitting and physical rehabilitation, or just hanging around on weekends to help out. The houses-turned-brace-shops provided an important opportunity for the children to give each other moral support, gain confidence and reduce self-consciousness.

The two facilities were officially linked in 2000 and organized as a registered NGO (non-governmental organization) named the Congolese Association for Orthopedic Assistance to Young Persons with Disabilities (Association

continued, page 2

The DRC has a population of over 60 million in an area of slightly less than one-fourth the size of the US. Straddling the equator, it is mainly landlocked with a 24-mile stretch on the Atlantic Ocean which contains the mouth of the Congo River. The DRC is a former Belgian colony and the official language is French. It is sometimes confused with the Congo (Brazzaville is its capitol), a former French colony that lies just west of the DRC.

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continued from page 1



Congolaise pour l'Assistance Orthopédique aux Jeunes Handicapés—ACAOJH).

In 1999, Nash, along with friends and family, founded the International Polio Victims Response Committee

(IPVRC) as a not-for-profit organization in the United States to raise additional funds to assist ACAOJH.

It covers virtually all costs for orthopedic equipment, pre-bracing treatment or surgery, and physical rehabilitation for poor families. Almost all of ACAOJH's staff is made up of former beneficiaries.

To its credit, IPVRC/ACAOJH supplements its brace-provision service with a program designed to promote the mainstreaming of the children. Many children with disabilities are never encouraged to attend school or are shunted off at an early age to special segregated schools to learn vocational skills such as tailoring, shoe-making and ceramics. The program counsels parents to send their children to regular neighbourhood schools and helps

them to cover school fees, as well as uniforms and books.

Today, brace-crafting facilities are maintained in Kinshasa, Lubumbashi and Butembo, cities located in the west, southeast and northeast corners of the country, each about 1000 miles away from the next. And, the two rehabilitation houses continue to operate. In his current capacity as senior program officer for USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance in DRC, Nash continues to advise the Congolese organization and serves as its liaison with IPVRC. ▲

Want to help buy a brace for a polio child (\$150.00)? Support the education of a polio child for a trimester or a year? (\$0.70 per day for one non-boarding student or \$1.00 per day for one boarding student)?

Contact IPVRC, 10250 Harrison Road, Loveland, OH 45140
www.ipvrc.org, info@ipvrc.org

Does your group provide assistance to polio survivors in the developing world? PHI is dedicating a section of its website to highlight programs that are directed by, or for, polio survivors. The goal is to facilitate networking among these groups and to encourage others to start similar programs.