
SENTINELLES

TO THE RESCUE OF WOUNDED INNOCENCE

N° 278 / October 2021



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BURKINA FASO

Sewing up faces and
lives: testimonies

COLOMBIA

Meliza :
giving back after receiving

SWITZERLAND

Prof. Brigitte Pittet : an
unwavering commitment

Editorial

Between hope and gratitude

Poverty is one of the factors that prevent us from progressing as individuals and as a society. In Colombia, for some economic, social and philanthropic analysts, poverty has an impact on violence; for others, it is the opposite. In any case, how can we look to the present and the future with confidence when we are immersed in the daily struggle to survive, when young people are wondering what will come of a country that sows death?

During the most important social mobilisations in the country's recent history, young Colombians made a vibrant appeal for help and put forward proposals to build a country with greater solidarity. The violent repression of the demonstrations did not dampen their hopes. They organised themselves, in their neighbourhoods and villages, supported by their communities. And what if they succeeded, thanks to their enthusiasm, creativity and pugnacity, in obtaining important and lasting changes? There are now seven million of them living in extreme poverty, demanding employment opportunities and access to education. Their strength could lead to real social reform.

This strength, as you will read, is embodied by Meliza, a luminous young woman. Proud of her journey and full of faith in the future, she wants to become an example for her peers, to show them that it is possible to break the hellish cycles and take the reins of her life.

Another article will take you in the footsteps of Professor Brigitte Pittet-Cuénod, former Head of the Department of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery at the University Hospitals of Geneva (HUG), in her collaboration with Sentinelles. Her expertise and unfailing availability are complemented by profound human qualities. The infinite attention paid to each child, the doubts and opinions expressed with respect when responding to our many requests, honour her. Many children and young adults with noma and other conditions have benefited from her unfailing commitment and talent.



Marlyse Morard
Managing Director

IN BRIEF

SWITZERLAND

New dates for guided tours at the VCA



Artwork © Hannah Klaas, collectif Marie-Louise

The Vaud Cantonal Archives are offering new dates for guided tours until the end of the year...

The presentation of the Sentinelles Foundation archives through the creative work of the Marie-Louise collective continues to be visible at the VCA during opening hours (vd.ch/acv) and on the dates below during guided tours.

An artistic look at sensitive archives.

- **Monday, November 8 at 5 :30 pm**
- **Wednesday, November 24 at 12:30 pm**
- **Monday, December 6 at 5 :30 pm**



Registration at info.acv@vd.ch or at 021 316 37 11.

**Brought back to life, entrusted to the future.
Not a promised land, but a land gained.**

We need you!

I MADAGASCAR

Alternative to foreign surgical missions

While waiting for the return of orthopaedic surgical missions from abroad, impossible because of the closure of the borders due to the pandemic, one of the implemented alternatives has been found in a centre run by Ursuline Sisters in the Analara region (230 km from Tananarive). They have their own clinic with an operating theatre. Normally, only children from this area are admitted, but due to the health situation caused by Covid, the Sisters agreed to collaborate with Sentinelles. Malagasy specialists carry out missions there.

For the start of the school year in September, we have been able to admit children who are waiting for an intervention. They will stay there as interns and will be educated for the time necessary for their rehabilitation.



I NIGER

A roof for Habsa

In Niger, Sentinelles provides medical care for children with noma. It also monitors the social and family situation of these young patients, who often live in great poverty. For many years, Habsa, who suffered from noma as a child, has been living from house to house with her mother, with no real anchorage and in constant uncertainty. Recently, mother and daughter, who were staying with a close relative, had to leave the home due to lack of space. In view of the family's great distress and precariousness, Sentinelles decided to build a house for Habsa, now 13 years old, and her mother.

Back in the village after undergoing surgery to reconstruct her face, Habsa was delighted to discover her new home. We wish her a bright future in this safe and stable environment.



I BURKINA FASO

Thank you

In our April newsletter n° 275, we asked for your support to enable us to finance a specific mission for women suffering from prolapse. Thanks to your generosity, we will be able to provide surgery to about twenty women. A surgical mission will be organised in October at the St Camille hospital in Ouagadougou. We will give you news in a future issue. In the meantime, we would like to thank each and every one of you who make this possible.



I COLOMBIA

Meliza's flight

At the age of 10, Meliza is taken in at the Tierra de Vida Centre (the name of Sentinelles in Colombia).

When we first meet her, we find out that she has dropped out of school and is looking after her five brothers and sisters. At the time of her admission, she expresses a strong desire to leave the family home. Her mother, Liliana, accepts her request because Meliza is a child born out of wedlock. At that time, this mother is prostituting herself and consuming psychotropic substances with her partner Fredy.

Meliza left our Centre at the age of 18 to live with a foster family; this family is composed of the mother, Andrea, and her sons Santiago and Tomas. In 2021, after spending two years away from Tierra de Vida, Meliza returns to us with the desire to help and give back what she has received to the children and teenagers of our Home.

At present, Meliza is doing her first practical training at the Centre and is integrating well into the team that individually follows up the children we accompany. On the family side, she keeps in touch with her two sisters, Maria and Dulce, who are also placed in a reception centre in Medellin. Her brother Anderson, who is homeless, has been missing since June this year. Finally, her two younger brothers live with their father. Meliza unfortunately has no contact with them.

We would like to share with you the words that Meliza has sent us.

"Hello, my name is Meliza Vanegas.

For eight years I lived with the Tierra de Vida Foundation. During these years, I was made aware of values such as respect, self-esteem, love and above all empathy. The Foundation has always been there for me. I was very lucky because I had many mothers who took care of my nutrition, my academic progress and my personal development. It has been one of the most significant experiences of my life. Thanks to this, I am what I am now.

Going through the Foundation has left me with many friends who I now consider brothers. I also had the chance to go to school, which was a very important experience for my future. Tierra de Vida gave me the opportunity to form myself professionally, to transform myself and most important of all, it gave me two families.

The first one is the Foundation, to which I owe so much for everything it has given me,



and the second one is the people I am lucky enough to have met and live with now, Andrea, Santiago and Tomas. They are the best gift I could have received; they are my family! Andrea is my mum, she taught me that people are special, magical and that we can all do good around us. Santiago is my big brother, with whom I am living a daydream because I always wanted a big brother to protect me and take care of me. He is a big brother who loves me unconditionally. Finally, there is Tomas, my little brother who is full of pure love.

Today I am twenty years old and in the fifth semester of my professional training as a social worker. Every day I like the job I have chosen a little more. Thanks to this new job, I have learned how to heal the wounds of my childhood through dialogue, something I could not do before. Through talking, through discussions, I have understood that we all have the right to make

mistakes and to have a friendly hand to help us.

Every day I train to be the best in my future work because I would like to travel the world and help many people in other countries and cultures. My dream is to be able to defend children through law, which is why I would like to specialise in children's law one day. I would like to be a

“I want to be different, I want to be remembered for my acts of love”.

good example for my little brothers, to be a positive reflection for many young people, to show them that dreams can come true. I am changing my life story, I want to be different, I want to be remembered for my acts of love.

I want to bring love to my brothers and be there for them when they need it, I want them to follow my example and be even

better. I struggle to show them that a different life is possible and to tell them that we can break this vicious cycle we have all lived with our respective families, that we can do things differently.

I hope to be able to come and see you when I graduate. At that time, I will be very proud to say that thanks to you, I am what I am today.

I would like to take advantage of these few lines to say THANK YOU for the great work you do and to tell you that I am one of the examples of the results of your commitment. Now I am working for Tierra de Vida as an intern, contributing my knowledge of social matters, helping other children who need a helping hand. A helping hand that you were able to extend to me when I needed it most.”

Meliza ■

I BURKINA FASO

Repairing the damage to a face

In June 2021, we concluded the first part of a project for the prevention and integrated care of children suffering from noma and maxillofacial pathologies in Burkina Faso. Building on the experiences and good practices developed in partnership with La Chaîne de l'Espoir, La Voix du Paysan and Bilaadga over three years, we are continuing this project, co-financed by the French Development Agency, and extending it to other regions of the country.

The integrated approach of the project and the partnership between several specialised associations - each one in a different field of competence - have made it possible to cover the different aspects of the fight against noma and maxillofacial diseases, from raising awareness among the population and health workers, to detecting the sick and providing them with care.

At the end of the last surgical mission in June 2021, during which 61 patients were operated on, we collected some testimonies from patients and their families, explaining their sometimes long and arduous journey to access care and health.

HAMADOU, AN ACUTE CASE OF NOMA DETECTED LATE

Hamadou was detected as suffering from an advanced, gangrenous stage of noma during an awareness-raising event organised by the radio station La Voix du Paysan in his village. Before that, his parents had not gone to any medical consultations despite the fact that the village has a CSPS (health and social promotion Centre). They were content with treatment by a traditional healer, thinking that their child was the victim of a bad spell cast by a genie. If the radio had not come to his village, the little boy might have died for lack of appropriate care. When he arrived at



Sentinelles, Hamadou, then 10 years old, was in poor general condition with severe malnutrition and gangrene in his cheek and lip that was falling off. After nutritional recovery and treatment at the Centre for almost two months, his noma sequelae were fortunately limited to a partial loss of the left commissure. The young boy was able to return home and await further home visits from our field team.

IDRISSA, WAITING FOR AN OPERATION

Idrissa is over 40 years old. He suffers from the after-effects of noma, which partially destroyed his nose. He also had to leave his village because of the terrorist attacks and take refuge in the nearest town. Idrissa had noma at the age of 4. He does not remember the acute phase of his illness, and says he was mocked and stigmatised as a child. His parents tried to send him to Ouagadougou for surgery at the time, but were dissuaded by their acquaintances who said they would have to pay millions for surgery. Later, due to lack of funds, he resigned himself to living with his injury. In March of this year, a childhood friend living in Ouagadougou contacted him to tell him about a free surgical mission relayed on social networks. Thanks to this information, Idrissa came in June for a first stage of reconstruction of his nose.



The next mission in collaboration with Chaîne de l'Espoir is scheduled for December. The next phase of the project began in July for a new three-year period, including awareness-raising activities in other regions of the country, particularly in eastern Burkina Faso.

DJIBRIL*, A MOTHER'S COURAGE AND DETERMINATION FOR HER CHILD'S HEALTH

It took the courage of his mother to overcome her initial fear and her husband's refusal to treat him so that Djibril, a 7-month-old baby with a cleft lip (birth defect), could receive treatment. A woman already suffering from a lack of consideration from her husband because she only gave birth to girls, her first boy was born with a malformation. In addition, the family had to flee their village because of jihadist attacks.

This mother tells us about the obstacles they faced.

"In my village, they killed people and we fled; when we deserted the place, we left with nothing, I couldn't take my things with me, that's how it is. We no longer have any activity because with the flight we can no longer have work, we have become wanderers. When I gave birth to this child, he was born like that, with half a face. I was scared; I said it was an alien that was going to eat me and I wanted to escape. They grabbed me and told me to take it, that it's not an alien but a disease. Everywhere I go I have to hide it so that no one sees it. If it's a baptism, a wedding, I hide it and keep my child silent.

When the goodwill people (editor's note: the staff of the medical centre) saw the child and gave me the document telling me to come to Ouagadougou where I would be helped to repair his mouth, my husband said that we would not come. I said I would come. The first appointment was given and I missed it. A child came to tell us that they (Sentinelles) had called, asking why we hadn't brought the baby. My husband went after the child who had told me about the call. I got up in the sun and ran to his brother's house who helped me, and the next day I took the car to get here.

I'm here so that my child will be healthy again. He will become like the others. He will be able to live like his peers."

When Djibril returned to the village after the operation, his father phoned to apologise and thank us. ■

* alias



I SWITZERLAND

Sentinelles and I, 35 years of collaboration



For a surgeon, working with Sentinelles is an incredible challenge and a perpetual questioning; constantly solicited by all sorts of problems and legitimate requests that are so difficult to answer!

“Can’t we reduce these scars? How can we lighten this flap which is not quite the same colour as the rest of the face? Is it not possible to restore the mobility of this mouth? This reconstructed nose has not grown like the rest of the face, what can be done?” Sharing with Sentinelles the desire to do the best and most possible for each child, all these questions and many more took up my days, and also my nights!

This regular confrontation with the limits of our techniques has been a constant stimulus to try to push them further. Thus, during all these years of collaboration, this reflection has allowed us to evolve the surgical techniques used and,

beyond the obvious humility regarding the results obtained, to note the impact of these facial reconstructions on the lives of these children.

Working with Sentinelles also means appreciating the human qualities, the ethics and the prodigious energy deployed by its members. Over the years, Patrick, Patricia, Sam, Manon, Sylvie, Valérie, Marie-Solène, Caroline, Joëlle, Marina and so many others... all of them attentive, involved, generous, concerned about the well-being of the children... all of them wonderful people who have accompanied and supported me in the care of these children.

Collaborating with Sentinelles is certainly an incredible privilege that I now realise has been present throughout my professional life and, above all, throughout my life as a woman and as a human being.

The doubts and difficulties that I may have encountered in all the delicate reconstructions carried out during these 35 years have been gratified by so many smiles, glances, words and love that I realise today that they have been my greatest reward and the strongest moments of my career.

The life stories I have been lucky enough to share, the children I have been able to see grow and blossom over the course of my missions, are the fruit of this long collaboration with Sentinelles and I am infinitely grateful for these magnificent exchanges.

I had the great privilege of meeting Edmond Kaiser at the very beginning of my career, and I know that his modesty, courage and humility are still alive in all of Sentinelles’ staff.

It is this boundless commitment to the people for whom we have taken responsibility that is the strength of Sentinelles, and I thank them for sharing it with me.

These 35 years of collaboration have passed like a breath of work, doubts, sorrows, joys, relative successes and painful failures, but always with the intense objective of doing better, of relieving and above all of loving.

Thank you for this!

Professor Brigitte Pittet-Cuénod
Former Chief Medical Officer of the Department of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery at the University Hospitals of Geneva (HUG)

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Les Cerisiers, route de Cery 16
CH-1008 Prilly / Lausanne (Switzerland)
Tel. +41 21 646 19 46
f @ sentinellesfondation
info@sentinelles.org, www.sentinelles.org

Banque cantonale vaudoise, 1001 Lausanne: BIC/SWIFT BCVLCH2LXXX
Swiss francs account: IBAN CH12 0076 7000 5045 9154 0
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