

# AN OPERATION CALLED

# HOPE

In the desperately poor African country of Zimbabwe, an all-female team of medical miracle workers is changing (and often saving) lives by providing free reconstructive surgery to children with cleft lips and palates. Difficult? Yes. The best thing they've ever done? Without a doubt. AIMEE LEE BALL puts on her scrubs.

Photographs by VANESSA VICK

**T**HE PEOPLE OF ZIMBABWE sometimes give their babies names that reflect the adversity of their lives in an impoverished and strife-scarred country, where grocery shelves hold little but cornmeal and a policeman earns the equivalent of about \$10 a month. So when a group of American doctors and nurses arrive at the pediatric wing of

Harare Central Hospital to perform free facial reconstructive surgeries, the children who are brought to be evaluated include Hard Times, No Matter, Wishes, Forget, Otherwise, Again (the ninth child in the family), and Swear to the Sky.

For several months, posters in public spaces have notified people in remote corners of this country about Operation of Hope, the brainchild of Joseph Clawson, MD, a surgeon from Longview, Washington. Dr. Joe, as he's known by patients, retired from private practice when HMOs took over the healthcare system and he realized he wasn't a 15-minute kind of physician. He began traveling to disadvantaged places in the world, starting with Chernobyl after the nuclear power plant disaster, and he kept trying to find the areas of greatest need. Learning that Zimbabwe had a large number of children with congenital defects—especially cleft lips and palates—he made plans to go in the fall of 2006. The day before his departure, the minister of health called to say, “We don't know if there will be any babies for you,” and Dr. Joe said, “If there's one, I'm coming.” On that trip, he had to turn away 50 children in one day and made a commitment to return twice a year. Now, for the ▶