



Healing a Smile

AMY JAMES '90 LEARNS LESSONS IN HUMILITY WHILE IMPROVING PROSPECTS FOR PERUVIAN CHILDREN

By Gabrielle Blitz '09

(Photo, top left) A mother and her child bask in a post-surgery glow, with Amy James '90 (center).

(Photo, top right) Amy James '90, a talented three-sport athlete during her Dickinson days, takes time out from her busy orthodontics practice to assist with surgeries in Peru.

AMY JAMES '90 had just opened her new orthodontic practice in Haddonfield, N.J., and had a 5-week-old baby at home when a well-known plastic surgeon paid her a call. He asked her to join his medical mission, traveling the world performing palate reconstructions. James kindly declined, feeling she had a full plate already.

But two years later, when he called again, her answer was yes. In 2003, she went to Lima, Peru, with Rotoplast, a division of Rotary International that aims to eliminate the occurrence of abnormal palates and cleft lips in children around the world by 2025. Since 1992 Rotoplast has served more than 10,000 children in 18 countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, India, Mexico, Nepal, Peru, the Philippines, Romania, Venezuela and Vietnam.

In Lima, James dug in as the dental counterpart for surgeons performing the palate and cleft-lip surgeries. "I made presurgical appliances and did a lot of extractions of decayed teeth," she explains.

Two years later, she revisited Peru with Rotoplast, helping the Indians living in the mountains, "not the Peruvians on the mainland," she says. In the mountains people don't have access to proper health care and believe that the reason some children develop cleft lips or have a palate abnormality is there was "a rainy season or that the pregnant mother encountered

voodoo," James relates. "What we are doing is life-altering—we are helping these children so that they can grow into adequate members of their society."

In the United States, one in 700 to 800 people have cleft lips, while in developing countries like Peru, the frequency is a bit higher, she notes. In addition, in Latin America children with cleft lips often are shunned by society, according to James. They drop out of school because they are ostracized, sacrificing their education or chance to learn a trade.

"It's hard enough that in the U.S. a 13-year-old doesn't have the right pair of jeans," says James. "Imagine not having half the roof of your mouth, so that every time you eat, food leaks out your nose."

In developed countries, an ultrasound can determine whether a child will be born with a cleft lip, and most babies will have surgery performed in the first few weeks of life, she adds. With surgery, all that's visible is a small scar.

During her first visit to Lima, James remembers seeing only two strollers, because most women carry their babies on their backs in cloth slings. "I saw one that was very colorful with beautiful indigenous stitching. Making small talk, I told the mother that I also used something similar to carry my children when they were young but that I really loved hers."

One day, toward the end of her visit, James continues, "this same woman came up to me and gave me a brown paper bag. Inside of it was the papoose [carrier]. She had given me something she couldn't live without, as a gift."

James, a cum laude anthropology graduate who earned her doctor of dental medicine from the University of Pennsylvania and certificate in orthodontics and M.S. in oral biology from Temple University, always had an interest in other cultures. Last October, she traveled to China as an orthodontic delegate with People to People International.

"As an American, I have had everything I ever needed," James concedes. Her medical-mission trips "have been the biggest lessons in humanity and humility." She plans to return to Peru soon to assist with more surgeries.

"I'm about to sound like an infomercial, but for less than the cost of a car payment, you can pay for a surgery and change the life of a child. Working with Rotoplast has been the most rewarding thing I've ever done professionally." 