

Lifestyles

Healing Hearts One Child at a Time

By Jason Feinberg

Photos provided by Jamie Mazzei

His father had a dream, a dream of not only all people being seen as equals, but a dream of people helping people in need. Continuing to fulfill his father's dream, Martin Luther King III and the Realizing the Dream Organization, along with actor/musician LL Cool J, recently presented the prestigious Champion of Hope Award to Jamie Mazzei, who had been nominated by Jake Lader, an honor student at Syosset High School. The award was the culmination of an amazing humanitarian feat Jamie and his wife Violet accomplished on an eye-opening and life-altering trip and experience.

Jamie Mazzei of the famed nuBest salon and spa in Manhasset. Last October, he and Violet set out to Uganda with the Gift of Life International organization to do just that – give the gift of life. The seed had been planted long ago and grew stronger over the years before it finally became a reality that Jamie could put together. "I always felt fortunate and wanted to do something. I was watching those infomercials late one night, the ones where you see all the children and problems in Africa and I kept switching channels and I started watching a motivational speaker talking about giving back. He was talking about how he got a kid out of being kidnapped to become a child soldier, and now the kid wanted to give back and build wells. 'That's it,' I said. 'I'm going to build wells.'"

Jamie did his research and found that a well cost \$5,000 to build. So he contacted some friends to go in on the project and they decided they would go to Africa and make a documentary in order to come back and raise enough money to build 10 wells. While attending a dinner for the Gift of Life International, Jamie decided to ask for guidance from Robbie Dono, the organization's chairman. As it turned out, the organization was planning its own documentary and Dono asked Jamie if he would be interested in going with them to Uganda for the Gift of Life's 10,000th miracle. The mission would screen 300 children with congenital heart defects who were in need of life-saving surgery and save one of those lives.

Jamie and Violet's journey seemed like something out of

a movie. After a stopover in Amsterdam where their flight was delayed due to a terrorist bomb scare, they arrived in Kampala. Having landed at night in a country with few-to-no streetlights, it soon seemed more like a covert operation than a humanitarian mission. The scenario changed as the sun revealed what Jamie could only describe as a makeshift city. "I felt very out of place and very far from home," he said. Detached from the Western world and far from his comfort zone, he knew that blending in was not an option. It was then they noticed a parade marching down the street, sponsored by the hospital they were visiting, and before they knew it, they were whisked up. The feelings of being an outcast just moments before were transformed into those of a hero's welcome. Jamie laughed as he recalled what happened at the end of the parade. "The hospital staff would speak to the crowd about keeping your heart healthy, then they would hand out food in brown paper bags and you could see the oil dripping off the bottom ... and we were there to screen people because of heart problems."







As word spread of the screenings, families came from all over to have their children, and in some cases children who weren't theirs, tested. Statistically, one in every 100 children has a heart defect, making it the No. 1 congenital birth defect in the world. "What made this tough was in some cases to have to tell a parent that their child had a problem and they would not be selected for treatment. And yet they were happy because they at least knew there was a problem," said Jamie.

It was soon decided that the Gift of Life's 10,000th recipient would be a boy named Jonathan. Jonathan had a hole in his heart, a hole that Jamie describes as about the size of a baby's fist, inside a heart that grew to the size of a volleyball. Left untreated, Jonathan might not have lived past his mid-20s.

The family lived in an urban area, Shantytown, with corrugated steel roofs, pieces of plywood nailed together that formed some sort of cubist artwork, dirt roads, and a real lack of sanitary conditions. Jamie quickly took out his video camera as the local children peeked at the stranger from around the corners. "I turned the viewfinder around so the kids could see themselves. I would run back and they would run after me and laugh. I went through a hole in a fence and then felt a stick poke me in the back and I was looking at the children – stopped, staring at me, with terrified looks on their faces." It wasn't a stick that had poked him. Jamie had wandered onto a military installation and was being held at gunpoint by a Ugandan soldier. "In the United States you would have been shot filming a military installation," said a very intimidating man, to which Jamie politely said, "True, but in the U.S., I would never have been able to get this close. There was nothing indicating to me that I was on a military base." At headquarters, Jamie explained why he was there and was told by a woman that, "It's good that you are here to help, but all of Uganda needs help." It was a statement that was all too true and would make Jamie wonder if this mission would even help in the long run. After reviewing the video, and quickly deleting everything, the soldiers released Jamie.

In 1975, the Gift of Life helped its first child, Grace Agwaru. Twenty-two years later, Grace now serves as an ambassador for the foundation and would travel with Jonathan back to the U.S. for his operation. The drive to pick up Grace, however, would become an adventure in itself. About two hours into the trip, the van broke down. Jamie recalled, "We were literally in the middle of nowhere. I just had that feeling like I did not want to be there. All of a sudden people came out of nowhere and started breaking off branches from trees and tossing them into the road on either side of the van." This was the Uganda system of road flares, and payment for fixing the van was gas siphoned from the tank. After meeting

Grace and getting a warm reception, it was off to the U.S., although they would find that the Ugandan customs officers were not eager to allow their citizens to leave.

Once in the U.S., both Jonathan and his mother, Joyce, were awestruck at how new everything looked. On Oct. 8, 2008 Jonathan was admitted to Montefiore Children's Hospital where Dr. Sam Weinstein took a piece of the sac surrounding his heart and repaired the hole. In only a few days, Jonathan was up and acting like a kid again, now without the health restrictions that had minimized his activity. Mom and son lived with the Mazzeis for six weeks while Jonathan recuperated. They visited the Empire State Building, had the red carpet rolled out at FAO Schwartz, saw the ocean for the first time, and Jonathan had a chance to be Batman for Halloween, a concept with which he was not familiar, but quickly adapted to.

Six weeks came and went quickly and Jonathan and Joyce prepared to go back home. Thinking about the conditions that they were returning to, Jamie stepped up once again and rented the family a beautiful home. As Jonathan later wrote, "It's nice to be able to do my homework without dust covering everything." Today Jonathan is more active than ever, playing soccer and living the life a child should live. He even has the only Nintendo DS in town, something Jamie jokes he's not sure Joyce approves of.

For Jamie and Violet Mazzei, the mission helped put life in perspective. They had helped to save a life and to make that life infinitely better. They plan to continue to support the Gift of Life and hope to sponsor another child. As Jamie put it, "This is just the beginning; our hearts are in this program." Yes, Jamie, but it is Violet and you who have captured our hearts. ●



Grace, Violet, Jonathan and Jamie