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JUNE 20, 2013

VOL. 13, NO. 25

SERVICE

Tanglewood resident works on hospital ship

By SARAH TUCKER
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In mid-July, 25-year-old Catherine Murphy will board a plane for the Canary Islands. From there, she will travel by boat to Pointe Noire, Congo.

She's not going to sight-see or to do business, though she

will be doing plenty of work and exploring.

Murphy is a full-time volunteer with Mercy Ships, an international charity that operates a floating hospital that provides medical services to people in third-world countries.

Now back home in Houston for the first time in 11

months, Murphy is already preparing to return to Africa and the *Africa Mercy*, the ship she'll call home for another six months.

DREAMING OF AFRICA

Murphy first fell in love with Africa after a family trip

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Photo by Ruben Plomp

Catherine Murphy joins an all-volunteer crew from over 30 different countries on Mercy Ships' *Africa Mercy*.

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MERCY SHIPS

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in 2007. An uncle who knew she wanted to go back to Africa told her to check out Mercy Ships after she graduated from college.

But after graduating from the University of Texas with a degree in journalism, Murphy went to work in public relations for a Houston law firm.

Mercy Ships was always in the back of her mind, she said. "I kept thinking, 'maybe now is the time.'"

Finally, in 2012, Murphy decided to join Mercy Ships. She applied and was accepted for a writer position, and she first stepped aboard the *Africa Mercy* in the Canary Islands in August 2012.

LIFE ONBOARD

Murphy works as an in-house journalist for the *Africa Mercy*, producing radio spots, press releases and pieces highlighting the hospital ship's work and their patients in Conakry, Guinea.

A typical day for Murphy starts at 6:30 a.m. for breakfast and crew and communication team meetings.

Then she heads to the hospital to check on patients she's following and meet with translators, the "favorite part of my morning," she said.

She spends the rest of her day writing and working on different marketing materials for Mercy Ships.

Murphy describes the *Africa Mercy* as half ship, half hospital. Doctors and nurses wear scrubs, and the ship's

CATHERINE MURPHY

Follow Catherine Murphy's adventures aboard the *Africa Mercy* on her blog, clarkemurphy.wordpress.com.

captain makes daily announcements.

"When you're in the hospital, it feels like you're in a hospital," Murphy said. "And it kind of feels like you're in the Navy when you're doing drills."

Murphy works with a diverse crew of all ages from more than 30 countries.

Some volunteer alone or with family, for as short as two weeks or as long as two years.

Murphy, who originally signed up for a six-month commitment, was so moved by her experience, she extended her commitment through December 2013.

SCREENING DAY

Although she interacts with patients daily, some days and patients stand out to her.

One day in particular is screening day, when the crew of the *Africa Mercy* screens almost 4,000 prospective patients to let them know if they're candidates for medical treatment.

"Most have never been to a doctor before," Murphy said.

Patients are then given a card with the date and time of their appointment. Sometimes, people are turned away because the hospital doesn't have the medical resources to treat their illnesses, such as cancer, Murphy said.

One focus of the *Africa Mercy* is treating physical deformities. A deformity they treat often with surgery is congenital pediatric cataracts, which occurs when a mother contracts rubella while pregnant, Murphy said.

One cataract surgery stands out for Murphy because it was so moving it gave her chills: A 4-year-old girl was able to see for the first time in her life.

"She kept trying to grab something on the floor," Murphy said. "She kept trying to grab her shadow because she had never seen it before."

"It just really put into perspective the things that we know and take for granted."

AFTER AFRICA

Murphy doesn't know

FAST FACTS ABOUT MERCY SHIPS' Africa Mercy

- First deployed in 2007
- Built in Elsinore, Denmark, in 1980
- Can hold up to 474 crew members
- Hospital has 78 patient beds
- Performs approximately 7,000 surgical procedures onboard each year

what she'll do after December, but she intends to study for the GRE while on the ship to prepare for her future.

Her work with Mercy Ships has given her "new insight" into the world of non-profits and the needs of developing countries, Murphy said.

"It's a career move in a weird, unique way," Murphy said.

And though her upcoming trip to Pointe Noire isn't her first trip to Africa, she suspects it won't be her last either.

"I think Mercy Ships will be something I volunteer with or donate to all life long," Murphy said. "If I'm able to go in the future, I would go back to Mercy Ships."



Photo by Ruben Plomp

Catherine Murphy is a full-time volunteer writer on the *Africa Mercy*. She has worked in Conakry, Guinea, for the past year and will head to Pointe Noire, Congo, in July.

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