

This volunteer is restoring smiles through the life-changing work of OSSA

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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According to Operation Smile South Africa (OSSA), every three minutes, a child somewhere in the world is born with a cleft lip or cleft palate - a condition that affects children and adults not just physically but psychologically as well. Giving them back their smile and the chance to live a happy, healthy life, it can take as little as 45 minutes for medical volunteers at OSSA to repair a child's cleft condition.



Leila Amien, medical student and volunteer at Operation Smile South Africa

Leila Amien is one such volunteer - a final-year medical student at Stellenbosch University who's been doing amazing work with OSSA since she began her studies. Her work with the organisation has seen her not only attend medical missions as a volunteer, but she's almost single-handedly put together the organisation's Annual Score 4 Smiles soccer tournament, raising significant funds, and creating more advocates for safe, effective and timeous surgery through educating young people.

For her work, Amien has also been nominated by Operation Smile South Africa (OSSA) for the Social Impact Award at Stellenbosch University.

This #CSIMonth, we caught up with Amien to tell us more about her work with OSSA and how she got involved, the upcoming Score 4 Smiles soccer tournament, and how corporates and the public can support the organisation's work.

What inspired you to volunteer at Operation Smile?

My interest in medicine was what had initially attracted me to the organisation. I became more involved with Operation Smile on a smaller scale at my university. In my second year of studies, I attended a medical mission in the

Democratic Republic of Congo. I was immediately in awe and humbled by Operation Smile after I witnessed first-hand what this life-changing organisation is capable of doing. I then started to take more interest, and although the medical aspect is what initially attracted me to the organisation, the humanitarian side humbled me the most. I then attended an International Student Leadership conference in Ireland the following year to learn and gain more experience on how to further build on skills to aid Operation Smile.

What is cleft lip/cleft palate and how is it caused?

It is when a baby is born with an opening in the lip and/or roof of the mouth (palate). Cleft lip and cleft palate is one of the most common birth defects. Doctors don't always know why a baby develops cleft lip or cleft palate, but many clefts are thought to be a combination of genetic (inherited) and environmental factors (like some medicines or vitamin deficiencies).

Why is an organisation such as Operation Smile needed?

A smile is something that many people take for granted but it is a sad reality the one in 750 children born in South Africa and the continent will be born with a cleft lip and/or cleft palate. Operation Smile South Africa is dedicated to making sure that no person should live a life without access to safe, effective and timeous surgery. None of this work is possible without the tireless efforts of our volunteers, partners and donors.

Those living with cleft conditions often suffer negative and stigmatic societal treatment resulting in emotional, social and economic costs which inadvertently extend to their families and communities. The organisation believes that access to safe, effective and timeous surgical care is a basic human right, and that the inability to obtain surgical treatment for cleft conditions impacts lifelong health and mortality rates among children in South Africa and beyond. It takes as little as 45 minutes to change someone's life.

■ ***How would you describe your experience over the last five years at the organisation?***

Being part of Operation Smile has been an amazing experience for me. It made me appreciate and not take for granted something as simple as a smile and the impact it has on one's life. It has motivated me to want to give more of my time and skill to help those in need. Witnessing the long-term effects that this operation has on the patients has been a driving factor for me to do and help more where possible.

■ ***Tell us about the Score 4 Smiles soccer tournament and what it's achieved so far.***

Since 2015, I have hosted a soccer tournament annually to raise funds for Operation Smile. This tournament is a five-a-side tournament that takes place at Fives Futbol Arena at Century City, Canal Walk which consists of 48 teams with over 300 players taking part. There is R8,000 in prize money for the winners and R3000 for the runners-up. This tournament surpasses my expectations every year with the amount of support from donors as well as supporters on the day. Over the past four tournaments I have raised R463,438 which equates to 83 cleft lip/palate surgeries.

This year I am hosting the fifth tournament in December.

■ ***You've been nominated by Operation Smile for the Social Impact Award at Stellenbosch University. What does this mean for you and the work you've been doing with the organisation?***

I am honoured to have been nominated and received the award. I appreciate that my efforts to make an impact in society has not gone unnoticed but I feel that this award must be shared with all the people who helped me along the way. My friends, family and colleagues have played a major role in guiding me to achieve what I set out to do.

To get involved with Operation Smile South Africa, [donate](#), enquire about [corporate partnerships](#), [volunteer](#), call 0800076453 (toll free), or WhatsApp 0608557971 to get in touch. For more information, click [here](#).

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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