

# "It is *Good* to be Normal"

## Hot wings! Pepperoni pizza!

"It is just awesome. I remember when I couldn't open my mouth. I just had to eat stuff I could fit through that little hole between my teeth. It is just wonderful to open my mouth and push a spoon in there," said Kenisha White, now 18 years old.

Kenisha was 10 and weighed just 42 pounds when she and her mother traveled from their home in Belize to SSM Cardinal Glennon Children's Medical Center with hopes of receiving a life-changing operation. They did.

At birth, Kenisha contracted an infection that spread to the growth plates in some of her bones. The joints in her jaw stopped growing and at her jaw became immobile. By the age of four she could eat only by tearing food into tiny bits which were shoved between a gap in her front teeth and swallowed without chewing. Her widowed mother, Amanda, was unable to find medical care for such a complex problem in Belize.

Kenisha was brought to Glennon by Frank Whipps, D.M.D., M.S., an orthodontist who has been leading missionary trips for two decades. During a fishing trip to Belize he met an American dentist doing volunteer work. "I started putting together groups of people to go there and do dentistry and medical clinics in various parts of the country," Whipps said.

He heard about Kenisha at a clinic in Belize City and quickly realized she needed care that was not available in Belize.

After returning to his home in Illinois, Whipps talked to oral and maxillofacial surgeon Kenneth Rotskoff, M.D., D.D.S., a member of the Glennon staff and an associate professor at Saint Louis University School of Medicine. Glennon and its doctors agreed to provide their services to Kenisha without charge, and Whipps began making arrangements to bring her to St. Louis.

Rotskoff and Thomas Donovan, M.D., a Glennon otolaryngologist, separated her skull and jaw bones, reshaped them into movable joints and used skin from her leg to create an interface that would prevent the bones from fusing again. They did not know if Kenisha would be able to chew after the operation.

Additional procedures were used to lengthen her jaw bone. Fractures were created on each side of her jaw and a distraction device was attached with pins. As new bone formed, screws on the device were turned gradually to stretch the jaw.



*Kenisha and her mom, Amanda in 2002.*

*The care Kenisha received at Glennon changed her life in many ways, from improving her nutrition to ending the childish teasing that faces a kid who looks different.*





*The Whipps' daughter Courtney helps Kenisha with her mortarboard. Kenisha served as flowergirl in Courtney's wedding in 2002.*



*Kenisha has a reunion with Dr. Michael Carstens at Glennon.*

"This will change her life," Amanda said during her daughter's stay at Glennon. "We are surprised that people made all these arrangements for her. We didn't expect this, not in a lifetime."

Kenisha lived with the Whipps family during her treatments. She began eating and chewing normally and celebrated her 12th birthday in Illinois before returning to Belize.

The Whipps family stayed in touch with her through occasional phone calls and visits during the annual trips of the Belize Mission Project.

Kenisha recently returned to the U.S. for a stay at the Whipps home near Belleville. She underwent orthodontic work in Dr. Whipps' office and took classes that earned her a general equivalency diploma.

"She hadn't been able to keep up with school in Belize because she got chicken pox last fall and had to drop out," Whipps said. "One of the things she had to study here was the Illinois Constitution. On that test she got the best score in the class. In Belize she'll know anything she needs to know about the Illinois Constitution."

The care she received at Glennon six years ago changed her life in many ways, Kenisha said, from improving her nutrition to ending the childish teasing that faces a kid who looks different.

"It was really wonderful to be able to open my mouth. I never stuck out my tongue at anyone before," she said. "I couldn't eat very well when my mouth was closed. I've been eating better and I gained weight. I can eat all different kinds of food now."

"Before the surgeries, in Belize people used to call me names. When I went back it was completely different."

Kenisha's favorite foods are pepperoni pizza and chicken, which is fried, baked, stewed or barbecued in Belize.



*Kenisha and Bonnie Whipps.*



*Kenisha enjoyed her own room at the Whipps.*



*Frank Whipps helps Kenisha with her GED studies.*

"She likes chicken wings, the hotter the better," said Frank's wife, Bonnie. "They can be the hottest of the hot and she makes them hotter."

After Kenisha returned to Belize, she began studies last fall at San Pedro Junior College. She hopes to pursue a career in hotel management, one of the few fields in which job prospects appear promising in Belize.

"We get e-mails from her once in a while," Whipps said. "She is committed to getting a college degree. She always has had an aptitude for math. When she was working on her GED here, she tutored some of the other students in her class."

"I want to study accounting," Kenisha said while visiting Belleville. "Math is one of my strongest subjects. I just like working with numbers."

"It is good to be normal and do normal things that other people get to do! It is wonderful for me."

*One of the things Kenisha had to study here was the Illinois Constitution. On that test she got the best score in the class.*