CONJOINED TWINS CHRISTINE AND LOICE
WERE SEPARATED TWO YEARS AGO,

INSEPARABLE

BUT THEY WON’T BE PARTED FROM THE DOCTOR
WHO HELPED MAKE THAT OPERATION POSSIBLE,
CINDY HOWARD '74.

Dr. Cindy Howard dreamed of herself in an operating room in Africa.
Margaret Atai carried a bundle of sheets into the room. When
Cindy peeled back the sheets, she found one of Margaret's twin
infants, Loice, dead.

"Where is Loice's sister, Christine?" Cindy asked. Margaret
told her, "She's dead too."
Wide awake and terrified, Cindy called Uganda from her
home in Maryland. A year earlier, she had helped bring the con-
joined twins more than 7,200 miles to Baltimore, where they
When Loice and Christine were born Oct. 28, 2001, their mother, Margaret, was prepared to deliver what she thought was one baby at home. After experiencing complications, she was sent to a nearby village where the sisters were delivered by Caesarean section. With a combined birth weight of six pounds, the two were attached from the breastbone to the navel, the most common connection in conjoined twins. The girls shared a diaphragm, sternum, chest wall, and abdominal wall. They also had a fused liver, and the upper chambers of their hearts were connected. Loice's heart was pumping blood into Christine's, a task that left Loice's heart in danger of failing. Also, if one girl eventually developed an infection, the illness would most likely spread to the other and send the two into a dangerous spiral. The twins were eventually flown to Baltimore to be separated.

Doctors began the surgery at the liver and eventually worked their way up to the twins' hearts. Anxiously, doctors clamped a blood vessel that connected the sisters' hearts and observed with relief that the hearts could beat independently. After the girls were separated, doctors rebuilt part of the walls of the twins' chests and abdomens with sheets of synthetic material and pulled skin over the surgical wound. For each child, the area of attachment was about 6 inches long and 4 inches wide. The surgery took 12 hours to complete.

were separated by a team of almost three dozen doctors, nurses and medical technicians.

Cindy told her premonition to a friend and fellow doctor in the Ugandan capital of Kampala. Concerned, her friend arranged for the twins to be examined at the district hospital in northwestern Uganda.

A pediatrician at that hospital examined the toddlers and, alarmed by their poor health, helped take them and Margaret 250 miles to Kampala, where the twins were admitted to an orphanage for nutritional rehabilitation.

When Cindy arrived in the city six weeks later to work at the hospital in Kampala, she couldn't tell apart the twins she knew so well. They were wasted and listless. Loice (pronounced low-eese) was suffering heart failure, and Christine had pneumonia. Unable to care for them herself, their mother entrusted them to Cindy.

Cindy and her Ugandan counterpart decided the girls should stay in the hospital guest house with Cindy and the other doctors and nurses on her trip. Cindy wouldn't part with them until they had found a home.

The High Court of Uganda gave Cindy custody of the girls, allowing her to bring them back to the United States. She was determined to find a family from Africa to adopt them. But after several months of unsuccessful searching, Cindy, 50 years old and single, realized she had a new title: mom.
While on a family vacation at the beach this summer, the girls enjoyed all the pleasures of normal toddlers — walks on the pier, a trip to the aquarium, ice cream cones and frolics on the beach. Even though independent of one another, the sisters still take comfort in holding hands.

Christine and Loice were born facing each other, joined from upper chest to navel. A nurse delivered them by Caesarian section Oct. 28, 2001, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Their mother, Margaret, had received no prenatal care and did not know that she was expecting twins.

Margaret took them to the nearest hospital, in Uganda, eight days later. After two days at that regional hospital, they were sent to the larger and better-equipped Mulago Hospital in Kampala, the Ugandan capital.

Cindy, an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Maryland medical school, was working at the hospital in Kampala during one of her annual, month-long trips to the country. A veteran of international volunteer work, she had been traveling to Uganda at least once a year since 1997. Before that, she lived in Nigeria for four years and has been haunted by the continent ever since.

Stepping off the plane in Entebbe, Uganda, she was always struck by the tropical heat and humidity, the smell of fresh water from Lake Victoria, oranges and pineapples, smoke from charcoal fires and burning brush. A part of her was home.

Cindy had never seen conjoined twins before, and she avoided them now. She knew their long-term care would be enormously difficult and expensive. She already was doing as much as she could.

Despite not seeing the girls, she received daily updates from the other volunteers at the hospital. An echocardiogram showed that each infant had her own heart. Further tests showed that each had her own stomach and intestines.

But the girls had only one liver, the organ that receives nutrients from the intestines and filters blood. Doctors couldn’t tell if each girl had her own connections to the
liver — a hepatic artery, portal vein and bile ducts. They also couldn’t tell if each had an inferior vena cava, the vein that returns blood from the lower body to the heart. If either twin was missing liver connections or an inferior vena cava, she could not survive alone.

The day before Cindy was due to return to the United States, as she walked across the parking lot in front of the medical school, Margaret Nakaketo, the pediatrician in charge of the nursery approached her. Cindy knew what she wanted.

The twins can be separated, Nakaketo said, but we can’t do it here. Without surgery, both girls will die. Could the surgery be done at the University of Maryland Medical Center?

Nakaketo urged her to meet Loice and Christine. Cindy examined them and met the family. She told them she would do what she could.

Back in Maryland, Cindy told hospital administrators about the girls. They told her that the operation would take an astronomical amount of money, money that would help the hospital care for other uninsured patients.

Cindy rehearsed her arguments: It was the right thing to do. The medical center owed Mulago Hospital for welcoming its doctors and residents over the years. The surgical team might never have this opportunity again.

After a staff meeting, she walked with her boss back to his office. While they waited for the light to change on a busy Baltimore street, he turned to her and told her the surgery was the right thing to do. He would ask the hospital CEO to support the surgery. The CEO agreed.
Cindy likened motherhood to being hit by a wave and tumbled in the surf. She wasn't sure she'd regained her feet.

This year, Cindy and the girls spent a week in July at the beach. Cindy and several of her friends from college and from seminary rented a house near Johnny Mercer's Pier, where Cindy's father had fished when she was a little girl.

They spent several hours one day at the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher, where the girls were fascinated by the fish, seahorses, jellyfish and other marine life.

Schools of children walked through the darkened aquarium, mesmerized by the brightly lit tanks.

The aquarium contains a rainbow of fish in all shapes and sizes. Although exotic, none has a story to match the twins'.

"Use your words," urged Ann Charles-Craft '74, one of Cindy's friends. "Can you say, 'hi, turtle'?"

"Hi, turtle," Loice said quietly.
Cindy no longer spends her evenings reading for pleasure or relaxing with friends and a glass of wine. She comes home to two giggly, squirmy girls who have helped her rediscover simple pleasures like art projects and sweet-smelling children straight from the bath.

Gifts to Loice and Christine to assist with their continuing medical needs and education may be made through their church:
Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church
611 Baltimore Annapolis Boulevard
Severna Park, MD 21146
Gifts should be designated with a memo line: Loice & Christine Fund.

"Can you say 'salamander?'" Ann asked.
"Salamada," Loice said.
The aquarium includes a short outdoor trail with a bridge over a pond. From that bridge, the girls observed the pond’s fauna.
"Look, the alligator," Christine said, pointing. "He's swimming."
"Say, 'later, alligator,'" Cindy urged when it was time to go.
"Later, alligator," Christine said.
After returning to the beach house, the family headed to the beach. The girls, impish in their pink and white striped bathing suits, played at the water's edge, always near Cindy. They're oblivious to the curious looks and smiling faces they leave in their wake.
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CINDY GOT HER FIRST REAL JOB IN 1969 AT MUNDO Vista, a Baptist camp for girls near Asheboro. Almost 17 and soon to be a senior at Concord High School, she was the lifeguard at the brand-new camp that summer, the same summer Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon.

She worked during the day, but the nights were her own. One night at the camp she listened to Dr. Tim Pennell of Bowman Gray School of Medicine talk about his medical work overseas.

Pennell talked about working in Kenya, about looking out a window in the morning and seeing a line of patients stretching out of sight. He worked all day and at sunset saw families dropping out of line.
"Are they getting impatient?" he asked a colleague.
No, his colleague said, they are returning to their villages because their children have died.
Cindy’s life took direction that night.
She finished high school and attended UNCG, where she spent hours in the library wrestling with the sciences. Biology and chemistry came more easily than math and physics, but she learned those too. She did what she needed to pursue her dream.

She gained a love of learning for its own sake, a love that served her well through medical school in Chapel Hill; pediatric residency in Birmingham, Ala.; her military commitment in West Berlin; a master’s degree in public health and tropical medicine at Tulane University; and volunteer work in the Gaza Strip, India and Nigeria.

She was called to work in places where food, water and electricity couldn’t be taken for granted. Places without an infrastructure of roads, schools and hospitals. Places where, for many, every day is a struggle for survival.

\textbf{When Cindy returned to Uganda in February 2002} to take the twins to Maryland for surgery, she again prepared to argue her case. She wanted Gordon, the man who had been caring for the mother and her two little girls, to come to Maryland too. A distant paternal cousin of the twins, he had slept on the floor of the hospital for four months. Every day he went to town and brought back food for Margaret.

In the wake of Sept. 11, the U.S. embassy had become a fortress. Visas were hard to come by. The Gordian knot of red tape was as forbidding as the embassy’s Marine guards.

But once again, help arrived. An officer at the embassy invited Cindy, Gordon, Margaret and the twins into her office. She told Cindy that Gordon should go to Maryland too. After taking care of the government business, the officer asked to pray for the twins. She got down on her knees, put her hands on the twins’ heads and prayed that angels would watch over them.
Independent for most of her life, Cindy has learned to invite and accept help. For example, one friend has taught her the finer points of detangling African-American hair. Every now and then this friend gives her a bottle of detangler. Weekday evenings have become a comfortable routine: quick and easy dinners, baths, a story time and then bed.

God has planned this and is going before us, Cindy thought.

Margaret, Gordon and the twins arrived in Maryland on Feb. 28. The 4-month-old girls had their first doctor’s appointment March 1. Loice was much smaller than her sister.

For six weeks, physical therapists massaged them, rolled them atop inflatable balls and put them in different positions on the floor, all to prepare them to be separated. In addition to breast milk, they were fed fruits, cereal, vegetables and vitamins to help them grow stronger.

During this time, the family lived in the Baltimore Ronald McDonald House. Cindy’s church, Woods Memorial Presbyterian in Severna Park, paid for their stay as well as for food, clothes and transportation.

Meanwhile, a team of doctors prepared themselves for the operation. With two dolls sewn together to resemble the twins, they rehearsed where everyone would stand in the operating room.

A 35-member surgical team separated the girls in a 12-hour operation April 19, 2002.
CHRISTINE, PERCHED IN HER HIGH CHAIR, TOSSES A frozen pea and puts her hands over her eyes. “You can’t see me!” she crows. She moves her hands and shrieks, “Surprise!”

This Sunday of Labor Day weekend is providing the family with time together before the big changes in store. On Tuesday, the girls will put on matching frog backpacks and start preschool.

The family lives in a townhouse in Ann Arundel County, far from Baltimore’s bustle. Pickups still outnumber SUVs on the roads here.

Cindy misses reading for pleasure and having a glass of wine with friends after work. Taking care of the girls prevents her from traveling to Africa, at least for the time being.

But the girls have helped her rediscover the simple joys of feeding ducks and walking through puddles. Independent for most of her life, she’s learned to invite and accept help.

On a typical weekday, she gets home around 6:30 and gets dinner on the table about an hour later. Dinner is an adventure with two squirming girls. Quick pasta meals, Chinese takeout and delivery pizza on Fridays are her lifesavers. After baths, the girls are in bed by 9.

This night, after devouring frozen peas straight from the freezer and noodles Alfredo, the girls are ready for dessert.

Christine: “I want a popsicle.”
Cindy: “How do you ask for it?”
Christine: “May I have a Popsicle?”
Cindy: “May I have a Popsicle what?”
Christine: “May I have a Popsicle, please?”

Cindy gives each of the girls a red Popsicle. Loice, her hands stained by markers, turns her Popsicle sideways and gnaws at the middle.

After dinner, it’s the ritual of bath time with twins—shampoo, rinse, repeat. The girls are bundled into purple nightgowns.

They’re put to bed, but even after their long day, they aren’t ready to go to sleep. Cindy remains in their room as they slowly wind down.

One of the girls implores her mom with a familiar refrain, “Don’t leave me.”
Cindy reassures them both, “I’ll never leave you.”