

Nurse comes to end of voyage of mercy

TAMWORTH nurse Gail Wheeler is approaching the end of four months of service as a volunteer in Sierra Leone with international charity Mercy Ships.

She has given her time and expertise in her third stint onboard the world's largest charity hospital ship, Africa Mercy, which has six operating theatres and a 78-bed hospital.

Her inspiration to help some of the poorest people in the world as an anaesthetic nurse has seen her put her hand in her own pocket for the cause.

"I enjoyed working with people from many nations on my two previous trips and felt that God wanted me to do it again," she said.

"So it was case of saving up holidays, using long service leave and saving a lot of money.

"All volunteers pay their own way to and from the country where the ship is docked for up to 10 months each year, and then pay crew fees to help offset the ship's running costs.

"My family and friends believe it is a very worthwhile thing to do, and some friends did give me something towards the cost of my airfare."

But the reward for Gail goes beyond what money can buy.

"I was brought up knowing how fortunate I was and appreciating what I had," she said.

"The people living in Sierra Leone and other nations of



VOLUNTEER AT WORK; Gail Wheeler, right, with Sydney anaesthetist Anne Marie onboard the Africa Mercy hospital ship in Sierra Leone.

West Africa are among the world's poorest.

"At times I feel very humbled by the attitude of these people.

"They have so little, but still give you a smile, welcome you and look after you."

A number of successful surgeries have impacted Gail.

"There are always very special moments in the hospital," she said.

"I was on duty as anaesthetic nurse when two children underwent surgery for bilateral cataracts. The next day I was in the ward when bandages covering their eyes were removed

and they could see. It was pretty special.

"There was a 19-year-old man who received surgery to correct his cleft palate. The pleasure I saw in his face will stay with me always."

In her spare time, Gail said she visited a home for old people.

"Local children also visit, and they just want a cuddle and play, and to touch your hair," she said.

"It is a wonderful experience to see people who have suffered so much, yet who remain happy and able to give you a smile."