

FOUNDATION FOR THE CHILDREN OF HAITI/FONDATION POUR LES ENFANTS D'HAITI

On Jan. 12, 2010, the world watched in horror as a massive earthquake pummeled the capital city of Haiti and its surrounding areas, reducing buildings to sand and killing hundreds of thousands of people.

As the destruction happened, I was already in the future, blissfully unaware of what was going on. You see, I was in India, and it was already the early hours of Jan. 13 when the earthquake hit. I was leaving for New York with plans to travel to Haiti later that week. I was half way around the world, caring for dozens of children and adults while on an evangelical and medical mission trip in the place where the Apostle Thomas spread the good news. I was with my spiritual father Dr. Paul Leaming.

The night before I was to leave India, I shared with our brothers and sisters on the India Evangelical Team the power of God in my life. I praised God for equipping me daily for whatever came my way and I assured them that this day was no different. After prayer, I headed to a room to do some reading awaiting a day of sightseeing and shopping with Dr. Leaming's daughter, Rebecca Hackworth, my dear sister and friend.

While waiting for Indian shops to open, Rebecca decided to check her e-mail. That's when she discovered the devastating news.

"Gladys," she said with a concerned voice filled with sorrow, "there was a 7.1 magnitude earthquake in Haiti, come see it online."

Before I could see what had happened, the Indian mission office employees were already praying. They were praying for Haiti, for me and my family in Haiti, my daughter, her husband and their two children, my brothers and sisters, the orphanages, the hospital, the employees and their families, friends and businesses that I know.

I headed back to the room where I had boasted of God equipping me with strength and I pleaded with God, asking him to equip me today, that I needed him more than ever. In the natural I was paralyzed. My brain cells froze as I as I could no longer think of my daughter's phone number. It didn't occur to me that no calls would have gotten through anyway.

I finally got through to my sister in Atlanta who told me she had heard from a relative that my daughter and family were fine. She also told me the hospital was standing, but she had no news of orphanages and the school. I called my other daughter in Memphis and she told me she also had heard from a friend that my daughter was OK and that she was at the hospital.

Even with all the good reports I was still not at peace. I remained that way until late that night, around 9 p.m. when I finally got a call from my daughter in Memphis telling me my daughter in Haiti was online. I was able to get online and chat with her through Facebook. It was only then that I started to feel some peace. She assured me that the hospital was OK except for some major cracks and broken pipes causing some flooding. The Village was also fine and all the children and staff there were safe. Most employees so far were OK, but no news of the orphanage and school yet.

Once I discovered my family was fine I concentrated on leaving India and flying back to the United States. Yet I was leaning on God for the necessary strength I needed to make it home and face the disaster I was seeing in images on CNN. Tears and fear overpowered me and I prayed even when I could not hear myself. The Christians in India covered both Rebecca and me with prayer throughout the day and beyond the time we left for the airport.

The heavy fog for Delhi did not allow all the planes to take off so my flight was cancelled that evening and rescheduled for early morning. I finally made it late Thursday evening to New York where I could freely talk to my family in the U.S. and in Haiti. I felt the sadness in my daughter's voice as she sobbed when she talked to me about the tragedy all around her and how she and the medical director of the hospital, Dr. Darline Gousse, held down the fort. I was very confident they were doing the best they could and very proud of them. Yet I knew there was a long way to go and no end in sight.

In New York, I was blessed with the help of many friends coming together to gather all the supplies we needed at the hospital. In just one weekend a group of Haitian medical professionals, including my children in the States, my brother and his wife, a board member, who is also a pediatrician, an orthopedic surgeon from Oregon, and other friends from the Dominican Republic, all joined me traveling to Haiti.

In the Dominican Republic (DR), 26 of us boarded a commercial bus, arranged by my daughter in Haiti, with supplies to sustain the hospital for a while. In all it took us just 24 hours to get into Haiti. We traveled nonstop, with the exception of picking up supplies in the DR furnished by CROSS International.

Once we crossed the border into Haiti we started to notice the damage. I cried and cried. One could not help but cry and call to God for strength. I have never felt so weak and helpless in my whole life. Yet in every circumstance, God was reaffirming to me that He is in control and that I should FEAR NOT!

I tried to equip our team with the strength we needed to face what awaited us. One important phrase I shared with them was that we were to be workers not dignitaries. So armed with God's wisdom and power we had to face the circumstances and do our best to help our people.

Arriving near the hospital, our big bus hit the pavement making a turn and for two hours the bus blocked traffic on a major street. As we were facing despair, a man tapped my shoulder telling me that he had a tow truck that can move the bus. Money was no longer an object, we needed to get the bus out of the way, but most importantly, we needed to get to work. After two hours, we arrived at the hospital where we could glimpse the disaster through the eyes of the many injured. Most of the patients were in the hospital parking lot afraid to enter the hospital building for fear of another earthquake. Thank God, a German medical team arrived and offered their services to the hospital for as long as they needed to be there. This team made up of doctors, surgeons, nurses, and technicians were immediately saving lives and helping the many injured people who flocked to the hospital. The team from NY organized mobile clinics to help the masses of injured people forced into shelter inside large tent cities.

With the medical team underway my next mission was to visit the children at the orphanage and the village. I was moved to tears as I hugged each child at both facilities and felt their spirits uplifting at the security they felt now that I was there. I was happy to see most of them smiling, laughing and playing.

Even in the midst of devastation I couldn't help but notice all of the mattresses were displayed outside. I thought, "How can all these mattresses be out? Did the kids start to wet their beds since the earthquake?" But I was quickly reminded that their only shelter now was the open sky as everyone was afraid of staying inside. Only one tent had been found so far for 54 children and 12 adults at the Haiti Home for Children (HHC) and three for the Village of 76 children. (The Rainbow of Love Nursery and the Hope Home for Disabled Children are at the Village.)

While inspecting the earthquake damage, I noticed the walls around the properties had collapsed including the ones at the hospital. The children's home at HHC and the Village suffered minor damages, but miraculously there was not a crack in the home of the disabled children. Still, the disabled children slept outside with the other kids in the makeshift campsite.

About one week after we got there more help started to arrive. Our friends and supporters managed to collect donations to help with the emergencies. But so much more is needed.

I am working more than 12 hours a day and experiencing deep pain and sadness. It was so sad to look at my daughter Natalie's determined face as she worked even though she was exhausted. Finally, I convinced her to get a break from the disaster and she returned to the United States for a much needed rest.

Throughout this entire ordeal I have met so many wonderful people who have pitched in to help in the midst of this devastating tragedy. Many of these people were strangers to me but now I am forever in their debt. People like Scoti, an American woman in California who volunteered to gather supplies that filled an airplane and then delivered the much-needed help to our shores.

Organizations — some we know, others we never heard of — brought food, water, tents, cots and blankets. Other organizations from abroad planned large shipments of donated goods to help with the relief efforts. With the love and support of all our friends in the United States, Canada, France, Germany and around the world, we have been able to help dozens of earthquake victims.

Our staff held up bravely under tremendous pressure. I realized that most of our employees had been deeply traumatized, with employees dealing with their own family tragedies.

At times it felt overwhelming but people like my dear friend Rebecca helped shoulder the burden. While in Haiti, Rebecca volunteered to oversee communications and meetings with various groups alleviating a tremendous amount of administrative work from my shoulders. I will be forever grateful for her help and support during those trying times. Through all of this, God has continued to whisper to me that He is in control and to continue to trust Him.

After the initial emergency we are now in the midst of long-term rebuilding projects. The hospital, the village, and the orphanage are all having construction done, but the most urgent need resides with the hospital. We have no choice but to follow the recommendations from engineers who evaluated the structure. The changes will mean a safer facility to serve those who are heavy laden.

The children are also receiving ongoing medical care and many children have been hospitalized because of the toxins that are now in the air. The children also have weekly psychological support.

On the whole, they are doing well. The children even had a wonderful Easter celebration with a party and egg hunt thanks to Judith Armstrong and her team of volunteers from Canada. The disabled children enjoyed this special time of fun, dressing up and eating all sort of goodies.

In addition to providing for the children in our care, FEH (Fondation pour les Enfants D'Haiti) has offered assistance, especially medical help, to thousands of earthquake victims. We have treated more than 9,000 patients at the hospital and mobile clinics. About 50 patients are still in the hospital. Their family members have joined them because they have no other place to go. More than 100 people are receiving care for their wounds, physical therapy and psychological support. At Hope Hospital, all care is free of charge and as long as we can provide the care the patient needs, no one is turned away. Up to nine surgeries, including amputations are being done each day. More critical patients are transferred to a larger hospital, the US hospital ship afloat in our harbor.

Even with the horrible events unfolding there have been moments of God-provided levity. My pastor comes to the hospital and prays with everyone twice a week. Other Christian groups have visited the hospital and prayed with patients. From the office we can hear the agony of patients who are having their dressing changed and the laughter and singing of patients worshipping God.

The hospital has become a family gathering place where families get together to share something as simple as a game of Dominoes with their injured loved ones. Babies have taken over the hospital's entryway as mothers were finally convinced it was safer to leave them there under a concrete roof than outside under a tarp

We have already distributed more than 500 relief kits of food, blankets, hygiene packages and water to many orphanages, church groups and families. We continue to receive a mass of donations and we plan to distribute this mounting aid to families through our new sponsor program for families. These families will receive basic relief that will allow them to return to a life of some normality within the year.

We are planning additional strategies to distribute other donated goods to those in need on an on-going basis.

I fear I've turned this update report into a novel. But there is much to say and much to do and we will continue to update you on our ongoing efforts to provide a safe and secure environment for patients and children in need. The road ahead is long, but we will not lose hope. Haiti will rise from this rubble as we trust God to help us through this.

I hope to write more as time passes and events fill the days for a better Haiti.

My warmest thanks to all my friends, family, and those who began as strangers but who are now our angels. Please continue to support, encourage and pray for us. May God bless you all!