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Haiti six months later: Long road to recovery

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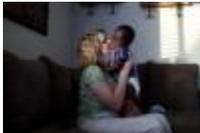
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Tia Simpson loves on her three-year-old son, Collin Simpson, while changing his diaper at their home in Lehi, Thursday. Simpson adopted Collin six-months ago from Haiti. At the orphanage, diapers were not readily available for the children. July 8, 2010 KRISTIN HEINICHEN/Daily Herald



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Imagine living in a place where a toddler can die of a cold, or a place where thousands of people are afraid to sleep in their own homes. Imagine being a single mother who has lost one arm to amputation or a young woman in need of heart surgery but not being able to find a heart surgeon anywhere in your country. Imagine being a mother or father watching your child dying or an orphan who, on one devastating day, lost everyone who cares about him.

This is the reality in Haiti. Infant mortality was high, jobs were scarce and education was almost nonexistent in the tiny, poverty-stricken Third World country 90 miles off the coast of Florida — and that was before Jan. 12, when the 7.0-magnitude earthquake ravaged the capital city of Port-au-Prince and surrounding areas. The damage was catastrophic, the international response almost immediate. Reporters and volunteers converged on Haiti. Organizations gathered millions of dollars from willing donors; many came from \$10 add-ons to cell phone bills. The world's eyes — and hearts, hands, feet and pocketbook — were on Haiti.

That was then. Six months later, the world has moved on while the people of Haiti have made do.

“I guess the thing I notice the most is the utter destruction, but life trying to go on all around it,” said Jan Groves, a volunteer with Healing Hands for Haiti who recently returned from her 12th trip to the Caribbean nation.

In some ways, the situation in Haiti is even more dire today than it was when the earth was shaking, if only because the suffering has continued and the attention has not.

“The situation is just as bad as back in January, if not worse,” said Nadmid Namgur, a BYU graduate student who helped found Sustain Haiti, which has been sending volunteers to Haiti since the end of April. “People forget about it, but the issue is still there.”

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been a major contributor and continues to provide aid. The church has sent medical teams, engineers, employment specialists and roughly 55 truckloads of supplies including food, blankets and tents.

A few other Utah organizations are still raising money and in-kind donations and are sending groups down to the Caribbean nation. Some, like Healing Hands for Haiti, have already sent teams of volunteer medical professionals to help Haitians in need of physical rehabilitation; they are focusing on rebuilding their almost entirely destroyed complex and continuing to provide

medical care. Others, like Sustain Haiti, formed this year because Namgur and other MBA students in a social entrepreneurship class saw a need and moved to fill it. A few Utah families also are in the process of adopting children from Haiti; one of those adoptions was finalized June 23.

Medical care

Two local groups, Healing Hands for Haiti and Americans Helping Haiti, are focusing their efforts on providing both immediate and long-term health care for Haitians. The Utah Hospital Task Force, which in January chartered a plane and shipped 125 volunteers and 13,000 pounds of supplies to Haiti, became Americans Helping Haiti, and the group's goal is to build a hospital in Haiti, said founder Steve Studdert of Alpine.

An assessment team was in Haiti last week to look at two other hospitals that they'll take over management of as well, he said.

They are raising money and working with the Haitian government to find land for the American Hospital of Haiti and have found a number of volunteers who can do hospital design, medical training and more. The problem they're running up against is that Haiti is still a mess: A third of its parliament was killed and hasn't been replaced because there's no infrastructure to have an election; there still are bodies that have yet to be recovered; less than 5 percent of the debris from the earthquake has been taken care of, and the unemployment rate is 98 percent.

"Things there are exceptionally difficult and worsening," he said.

The group is working with the United Nations, the World Health Organization and other groups to get things moving in a country that is essentially paralyzed by disorganization.

"Our highest priority is obviously medical care for those who are suffering, and how do we do it fastest and best and most economically and hopefully save lives in the process," Studdert said.

Healing Hands for Haiti, which was founded in Utah, has been sending groups of health care providers to Haiti for years; they have a compound with a clinic and a guest house in Port-au-Prince. All but the guest house was destroyed in the earthquake, so in addition to gathering more volunteers to keep the trips going, they're raising money and designing a new compound, including a hospital.

The group's primary focus is in prosthetics and physical rehabilitation, but the organization also sets up clinics to offer general health care. Groves was at a pediatric clinic in Port-au-Prince when a father brought in his 2-day-old, 2.2-pound baby boy. The boy's twin brother had died at birth; the boy's mother, who was on crutches after getting hurt in the earthquake, stayed home — if you can call the tarp they lived under a home.

The medical staff determined the boy should be in a hospital; he was so small and unprotected where the family was living. Admitting him to the hospital cost \$30 a day.

Groves, who is an administrator at Intermountain Medical Center in Murray, and the other volunteers turned to the only financial resource they had — their own pockets. They all put in money so the boy could spend the next 10 days in the hospital. He was alive when she left the country; Groves doesn't know if he still is.

He was one of the hundreds of people the organization, which had more than enough work before the earthquake, has helped since Jan. 12. About 10 percent of Haitians had a physical disability, Groves said. After the earthquake, that number has increased. There simply is not enough help to go around.

"Everywhere you look, there's need," she said. "It doesn't matter what you mention."

Katie Walther, a nurse at Utah Valley Regional Medical Center, said Healing Hands also is a contact point for international aid organizations who need volunteers with a certain skill set, such as knowledge of Creole or specific medical abilities. Healing Hands has created a database for people to sign up and list their skill sets and availability and then ships those individuals to Haiti to help.

The organization also trains Haitian health professionals to provide health care, both to help the local economy and so quality health care is always available.

Sustainability

Namgur, a founding member of Sustain Haiti, is a Mongolian graduate student who wanted to promote self-sufficiency. He said he and his classmates felt like many needs were being met by other organizations, but they wanted to focus on rebuilding, not just crisis management. Since April 28, the group has had a constant presence in Haiti with a mission to promote self-sufficiency among the Haitians by providing education and resources.

"We realized that not many organizations had long-term sustainable solutions to the very big issues," he said.

Every Monday a few graduate and undergraduate students leave for Haiti and spend two to three weeks teaching clean water solutions, square-foot gardening, microlending and hygiene and sanitation. They work mostly in Leogane, a small town west of Port-au-Prince, educating, helping with construction work and teaching English, which was an unexpected task, he said.

So far, he said, they've been fairly successful. They have helped start about 40 square-foot gardens, which is a novel idea in a country where farming is associated with huge plantations.

They've even found a local resident who was so converted to the idea of square-foot gardening that he's taken over the classes for them. That means, Namgur said, the classes will keep going when all the volunteers go back to school in the fall, which is the whole point of the project.

Each volunteer takes two suitcases of in-kind donations filled with clothes, hygiene kits and toys; LDS wards have made clothes and the MBA student association has collected used clothes and other goods. The volunteers spend much of their time in orphanages— playing with the children, teaching them songs and reading to them, as well as teaching about hygiene.

“Those kids in the orphanage are so adorable, the cutest kids you can find,” Namgur said. “You can tell they're just so hungry for a little affection and just being hugged and being played with.”

A new life

No one would argue that the two Haitian 2-year-olds at a Lehi day care are, in fact, some of the cutest kids you could find. Collin and Nathan were in an orphanage in Petionville outside of Port-au-Prince, more than 2,000 miles away from their adoptive parents, when the earthquake struck. For days, Tia Simpson and Brent and Lori Rosenlof didn't know if their children had survived, then they waited in limbo for another couple of weeks before finding out the children were being taken out of Haiti on the same plane that brought the Utah Hospital Task Force into Haiti.

For the Rosenlofs, who had known Nathan since he was only a few months old, bringing him home was one of their greatest days, although it's sure to be overshadowed by July 19, the day his adoption will be official. He's integrating well and sometimes even sleeps the entire night in his own bed, Brent said; in some ways he seems to be taking after his tall parents.

“He's just growing in leaps and bounds,” Brent said of Nathan. “I think he's going to be six foot tall by the time he's three.”

Tia is officially the mother of the toddler she's considered her son for the last year; Collin's adoption was finalized on June 23. She went to Haiti a year ago with the Rosenlofs with no intention of adopting a child; that resolve wilted about five minutes after Collin fell asleep in her arms. The adoption process that normally takes many years took her only one because of the earthquake.

“I am completely overwhelmed, but I love every second of it,” she said of being a mother.

Her favorite part about her son?

“Just seeing him smile,” she said. “I only saw him smile a few times when I was in Haiti just because of the conditions there, and to see him smile every day and to hear him laugh and to hear him call me Mommy, that’s just awesome.”

Collin and Nathan are talking more and using more English, although their parents still frequently don’t know what their 2-year-olds are saying.

As if they don’t have enough happening, the Rosenlofs are only half done with getting their children here. They were in the process of adopting 3-year-old Jessica from the same orphanage; a month before the earthquake her birth father unexpectedly took her. Brent and Lori are hoping she still will be able to be a part of their family one day. During a recent trip to Haiti, Brent tried to contact them and talk to him, which didn’t happen. Their next hope is that Miss Jess’s father will love and take care of her.

The June trip was for the Rosenlofs’ nonprofit organization, Bel Haiti, which recently purchased nine acres of property with its partner Haitian Roots. Their plan is to build a school, an orphanage, farms and perhaps a small medical clinic on the land, and Brent went down to determine what they can actually do next. They’re trying to partner with an organization that will help build a perimeter wall using shipping bags filled with sand and dirt. Brent also met with students from the University of Haiti and the University of Utah to get feedback on how to build a more earthquake-proof building.

The need for such building measures is even more evident six months later, since people are still sleeping on the ground, scrounging for food and firewood and feeling all the effects of the earthquake except for the actual earth shaking.

“Nothing’s changed,” Brent said. “I saw one or two pieces of heavy equipment in all of our travels in five to six days down there. Really, nothing has changed.”

What can you do?

Healing Hands for Haiti, Americans Helping Haiti and Bel Haiti are raising money for their building projects; check out their websites for information on the projects and how to donate or volunteer. People wanting to donate material goods also can contact these organizations for ways to transport the items to Haiti. The most important thing, all of these volunteers said, is realizing the country still needs help.

“It’s not like a six-month anniversary in the United States where you see great improvements made,” Healing Hands’ Walther said. “Things move so slowly there. I think that’s our biggest fear, that pop culture will take over and people will forget Haiti. It’s an ongoing story. This is a story that is not over.”