

Lending a hand in Haiti

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Disaster strikes while Strauser on island giving medical care.

Haiti's earthquake was horrific but many of its people suffered starvation and malnutrition before the disaster.

Garry Strauser, father of Tim Strauser of Gothenburg, witnessed it all while on a Haitian island from Jan. 9-17.

Strauser, of Hot Springs, SD, traveled with 11 other mission workers to the village of Anse-a-Galets on the island of La Gonave to provide basic medical care to the islanders at the Celebrate Jesus facility.

While on the island, several earthquake victims were treated at the mission for open wounds, fractures and bruises from falling concrete blocks.

"In all, I think we treated a couple of van loads of survivors, all coming from Port-au-Prince," he said.

One of the victims suffered second- and third-degree burns to her leg when boiling oil of a fellow

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vender spilled on her when the earth started to move during the Jan. 12 earthquake.

A doctor on the team cared for a woman who had been pulled from rubble after 2 1/2 days. She had a fractured jaw and was dehydrated.

Others needed tetanus shots, cleansing and debriding of wounds, rehydration with intravenous fluids and pain and antibiotic medications.

Strauser said there's a clinic and hospital on La Gonave but patients have to pay to be seen there.

Strauser's medical mission team was sent out from The United Churches of Hot Springs, SD, which was made up of several denominations and included two doctors, a physician's assistant, a nurse practitioner, three nurses, a pharmacist and four non-medical folks.

After their arrival in Port-au-Prince on Jan. 8, they spent the night at the Walls Guesthouse where two staff members and three guests later were killed when part of the building collapsed during the earthquake.

A small plane flew the group to La Gonave the next day where members stayed at the Celebrate Jesus compound in Anse-a-Galets until Jan. 17.

Because of fuel and airport problems in Port-au-Prince due to the earthquake, the plane was unable to pick up the group as planned.

Strauser said alternative plans were made and the team took a lobster boat—operated by the Wesleyan missionaries on the island—across to Montrouis on the big island.

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From there, part of the group spent the night in a home on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince before they returned to the States on an Amway jet that had just flown relief supplies to the Haitian capital.

Strauser and another team member rode about 120 miles in the back of a covered cargo truck with a couple of other short-term missionary groups, traveling up the western coast of Haiti and through the mountains on a seven-hour journey from Montrouis to Cap-Haitien.

They spent the night at a missionary compound and flew home the next day.

Strauser, 62, a retired diagnostic radiologist, continues to work part-time at the Veteran's Administration Black Hills Health Care System.

He said he's been active in his church for many years but had never before been directly involved in any foreign mission work.

That changed when two fellow church members—both who had traveled on a medical mission to Haiti—invited him to go in January.

Although the clinic offers basic radiographic services, the X-ray machine was not working so the team was limited in what members could diagnose and treat.

In addition to treating the “walking wounded,” team members continued to see local Haitians who came in with routine ailments such as skin disorders, lice, urinary tract and yeast infections, eye and ear infections and foreign bodies, ingrown toenails, cuts, burns, malaria and typhoid fever to name a few.

All of the 850 people seen received a pill for worms, he said, noting that many of the children complained of abdominal pain while adults complained of “acid.”

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“This is understandable since the average Haitian on the island is said to eat only about three times a week,” Strauser said.

Apparently his team was the first medical one to staff the clinic in the Celebrate Jesus compound that also includes a school, church and guest housing.

Celebrate Jesus also has an ongoing feeding program for children up to 5 or 6 years of age who receive rice and beans at three stations throughout the village six days a week.

The earthquake occurred on the second day of the clinic.

“It sounded as though a freight train was coming followed by significant shaking of the entire building,” he said, noting that one team member described it as though “we were trying to stand on a water bed.”

Although it lasted about 30 seconds, Strauser said it was obvious the quake was massive.

“Everyone rushed out of the two-story building but the concrete stood firm as it was strongly reinforced by heavy steel,” he said, noting that the missionary pastor quickly allayed the fears of the people. “Through an interpreter, she told them that this was coming from the earth and that it was not caused by an evil spirit or by God.

“She emphasized that they had neither done anything wrong nor caused this to happen.”

Strauser said the people began to sing Christian songs in Haitian Creole and gathered in a large circle for several minutes of prayer.

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After the building was inspected for structural damage, he said they returned inside and completed the clinic for the day.

As far as he knows, Strauser said no one on the island died from the earthquake but islanders on the mainland did.

“We experienced several immediate aftershocks—one or two of which were quite strong,” Strauser said. “Over the next 2 1/2 days, there were probably as many as 45 tremors.”

At the insistence of the native pastor, who learned that he had lost four family members in Port-au-Prince, the mattresses of mission team members were moved outside and they spent a night under the stars.

Fortunately, Strauser could telephone his wife Pat within less than two hours after the quake.

“She had heard of the large quake only about 20 minutes earlier and was very relieved to hear from us,” he said.

A short time later, however, telephone communication was lost on the island for most of the next two to three days.

“Strangely, I don’t remember ever being afraid during the earthquake and the many aftershocks but experiencing those rumblings of the earth does humble a person,” he said.

Sadness is what Strauser said his group experienced after the quake.

“Although we saw relatively few direct victims of the earthquake, we saw many who experienced grief associated with loss of one or more friends and family members,” he

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explained. "We had formed a bond with many of these dear people in a rather short time but our hugs and condolences seemed inadequate in the face of this disaster."

Strauser said only the Holy Spirit can provide the comfort needed to soothe many of broken hearts.

Working in Haiti changed his life, he said.

"Seeing the poorest of the poor and having them reach out to you for a hug has to change you," he said. "We often see poverty on television and read about it in books and newspapers but looking into the dark eyes of those who have the physical signs of malnutrition has to change a normal person, doesn't it?"

Strauser said he feels blessed to have had the opportunity to offer medical care to Haitians and help feed children.

"I gained much more from them than I was able to return," he said.

The biggest challenge while on the island, he said, was the language barrier even though the interpreters were helpful,

"Most Haitians speak Creole with only limited French," Strauser said.

The lack of laboratory and X-ray equipment also limited what the group could do.

"Probably one of the most difficult things for me to deal with was the knowledge that we would treat these patients only to have them return to their little huts where they had no running water or electricity and only limited ability to provide themselves with proper aftercare," Strauser said.

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Strauser said people can help the Haitians through prayer.

Monetary donations to well-proved and respected relief organizations are needed, he said, but long-term improvements in the infrastructure will be necessary for Haiti to overcome the disaster and pre-existing problems related to poverty and lack of clean water, food, fuel sources, sanitation, education, and health care.

Haiti will continue to rely heavily on the missionary and other humanitarian efforts to meet its most basic needs, Strauser said.

“Folks should consider answering the call to use the gifts and talents they’ve been given to go help people who have had no choice in where they were born or the conditions in which they find themselves,” he said.

Despite poverty, Strauser said he observed that many of the children and adults seemed happy—smiling, wanting to be hugged, and enjoying having their picture taken.

After the earthquake, it seemed that people he met had lost at least one family member.

“With a life expectancy of somewhere between 50 and 59 years, the people seem to be relatively accepting of death,” Strauser said.

Outwardly, the Haitians seemed to deal with death better than “we do in our society” often taking the form of loud wailing in the middle of the night.

“It was particularly difficult for them when they had to identify a deceased family member or when they were never given the opportunity to again see their friend or loved one,” Strauser said. “It was also refreshing to witness the genuine spirituality of these native people as we

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attended worship services with them and as we worked with them in the clinic during the week.”

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