

My Return to Haiti

It has now been six months since my first trip to Haiti to start a Hand Therapy clinic at the Northwest Haiti Christian Mission (NWHCM). I wasn't planning on going back this soon, but somehow I found myself signing up to go again. I've been home for two days now trying to process what has just taken place over the past ten days. I returned to Haiti with two friends from church, Sue, a Children's minister, and Chris, an English teacher. For some reason the travel to Haiti was long and exhausting. Our Miami flight to Port au Prince was delayed, which caused us to miss our connecting flight to the Mission at St Luis du Nord (90 miles North-West of Port au Prince). Consequently, we ended up spending the night in Port au Prince along with 3 other Mission volunteers. As is often the case, when our plans are forced to change, we consider it to be a waste of our time. However, as hindsight usually reveals, it was not a waste of time, but a blessing. I saw Port au Prince again first hand as we drove to our hotel. It was so encouraging to see the progress made over the past six months; the rebuilding of the airport, main roads and homes. I even saw a garbage truck making its rounds. As we traveled further away from the airport into the inner city, familiar scenes of devastation returned; sewage, tent cities and lost people wandering. Most are still living in filth and dire poverty. Even so, I was encouraged for the Haitian people as I could see that some progress was being made.

While at the hotel, which by US standards would be considered a one or two star rating, the six of us spent time getting to know each other. Andy, from Kentucky was the Mission's lead photographer and he had become our leader making sure that arrangements were made for our flight out the next morning. I was able to spend a good deal of time with Andy exchanging life stories and explaining about what I do as a Hand Therapist. I had a glimpse at that time, that the relationship that we had just formed would be vital to promoting Hand Therapy, not only at the Mission, but nationally as the Mission's web page and magazine are accessed all over the country. It was the formation of this relationship that allowed me to approach Andy later on in the week requesting to have his intern take photos of patients being treated in the clinic, which would later lead to a human-interest story about the life of one of our hand therapy patients, "Bouzi". Bouzi had lost hand functioning as a result of a machete injury lacerating his flexor tendons and palmar nerves all while trying to protect his family garden. This missed flight/delay turned out to be an unexpected blessing and an excellent marketing opportunity.

The next day, shortly after arriving at the Mission, exhausted and dirty, I was approached by the Mission's medical coordinator, Maureen, to see a two-week-old baby with clubbed hands. This baby was born to the Mission's Haitian cook, Luckner. I could see that both Luckner and his wife were very fearful and saddened, which touched me immediately. They were both Haitian, living in a prominent Voo Doo culture. Although they were Christian, they both shared with me that they could not help but fear that somehow their baby whom they loved so dearly, was cursed for life. The week before my arrival, Dr. Dell Worthington, from Arizona, a faithful and frequent volunteer to the Mission, advised them that surgery could be considered when the baby is 18 months old. In the meantime, splints would probably help to lessen the fixed contractures of the elbows and wrists.

It was about 7pm, so I asked them to come see me in the clinic tomorrow and I would make splints for Daana. I could see the relief on their faces, but inside I wondered if I could do the job. That night in bed I prayed that God would give me the skills I needed to help this little baby, and that somehow I could bring hope to these parents. Daana's hands were smaller than my cat's paws. I was so afraid that the splints would cause pressure areas, as I was dealing with multiple contractures. I could cause the baby more harm than good. I fell asleep that night still praying.

With divine help, over the next two days I was able to make bilateral elbow and hand splints fit well and actually work. We saw such positive results by the end of the week, we all thanked God. It was an example to all of us that faith and hope were greater than any curse.



Over the next few days the clinic was open and running at full force. I saw over 80 patients with various injuries and illnesses. I made splints for wrist drop, fractures, sprains, strains, spasticity, machete lacerations, etc. Patients were instructed in exercises, ergonomics, joint protection, wound care, scar management and more.



When I finally took a moment to breathe and reflect, I was so grateful and proud of the therapists who had put their hearts and souls into keeping this clinic open and running these past few months. Debbie Paulm, Helen Konduris and Macon Dukes, you are the best! The mission's medical staff could not sing your praises enough. Because of you, the Hand Clinic now solidly stands and in fact, there are plans for its expansion and move to a more visible location in 2011.

Even the founder of the mission, Larry Owen, who is now retired from the Mission and everyone calls "Big Boss", came to me as he was curious what hand therapy was all about. He listened as I explained about the service and the therapists who came over the past few months. He said that he was grateful and that the Mission was privileged to have such specialists come. I also shared with him that I was worried that no other therapists had signed up to come after me. Big Boss gave me great words of encouragement that God would work in people's hearts for them to come... for the Haitian people need them. It is with this kind of faith and love for the Haitian people that he started this Mission 40 years ago. I had a wonderful conversation with this loving and inspiring man and I could see why God has blessed and protected this Mission through the years. He has loved and devoted his life to serving the Haitian people, not only giving them jobs and teaching them trades, but giving them a hope.

For me, this trip was very different from the first trip in March. Certainly, marketing the Hand Clinic was brought to a whole new level. More importantly, it wasn't so much about tasks but rather about forming relationships. I learned that you can love God and serve but if you don't love the ones you're serving, it is wasted. As for me, my love for the Haitians is growing and I plan to return to Haiti in the spring. As Hand Therapists we have so much to offer to the Haitian people. I would urge each Hand Therapist reading this to search your hearts.



Are you being called to Haiti?

From my heart to yours,

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