

## Rotarians Witness Chaos In Haiti

-- By Ryan Hyland - RI News -- 20 January 2010



*Haitians in Port-au-Prince minutes after the earthquake struck.*

As president of the Rotary Club of Houston, it had been Michelle Bohreer's dream to travel to Haiti and conduct a service project to improve the lives of children there.

On 12 January, 45 minutes into a weeklong trip to Port-au-Prince to do just that, the dream quickly spiraled into a nightmare.

Bohreer and a team of five Rotarians from Houston were heading into Haiti's capital city to implement a water project for an orphanage when a powerful earthquake rocked the area, causing widespread devastation.

"Minutes after the quake happened, thousands of people poured out into the street running and screaming. Hundreds were walking around bleeding," says Bohreer. "It was moments like that when the absolute catastrophe hit you."

The quake, the worst in the region in more than 200 years, flattened much of the capital, killing as many as 200,000 and leaving millions more injured. A massive international relief operation is underway to bring food, water, and medicine to those who need it.

"I was overwhelmed by sights, sounds, and smells that I will never forget," says team member Vicki Brentin, past president of the Houston club. "I held tight to the hands of frightened, injured children and looked deep into the eyes of their mothers or fathers begging for help.

That left a compelling and lasting impression on me."

Unable to leave the country, the team members spent four days in Port-au-Prince trying to help in any way they could. They found a collapsed hospital, sifted through the wreckage, and found Tylenol and antibiotic ointment to distribute to injured people.

"The injuries were too severe for the medicine we had, but receiving care of any kind during that time gave them hope. It gave us hope," says Bohreer. "I've never been so proud to be a Rotarian."

On 15 January, she and her team were able to board a charter flight to the Dominican Republic and, from there, back to Houston, where they arrived safely the next day.

Brentin said the team drew strength from the Haitian people who they encountered. "I was so moved by the amazing spirit of the Haitian people who, in the face of their own tragedy, pain and suffering, reached out to us with such kindness and concern for our well being." Bohreer says her club will be back to help the country rebuild.

"We as Rotary have an obligation to take care of people who are suffering under such difficult conditions," she said.

### From safety into catastrophe

A day after the earthquake, Caleb Lucien, a member of the Rotary Club of Pignon, and nine other Haitians traveled 85 miles south from Pignon to Port-au-Prince to assess the damage and help victims.

"The city is completely destroyed," says Lucien, Health and Hunger Resource Group coordinator for District 7020 in the Caribbean. "We drove past hundreds and hundreds of dead bodies. The loss of life is beyond belief."

Lucien spent US\$3,500 of his own money on water and food to distribute to victims. He also searched for Rotarians who he knew lived in affected areas and helped evacuate more than 120 injured people to Pignon.

"It was not a time to feel or think about the devastation. It was a time to act," he says. "I grieve, but I have to move forward and focus on getting Rotarians to help in the recovery."

He is working closely to bring relief supplies to affected areas with District 7020's Haiti Task Force, established two years ago to administer financial aid to the nation.

"The immediate need for the next two to six months is shelter, food, and clean water," says Lucien. "In the long term, I hope to see Rotary help with rebuilding infrastructure such as schools, hospitals, and churches."



*The Rotarian team arrives home in Houston, Texas, USA, four days later. Photo courtesy of Michelle Bohreer*