

Healing Hands for Haiti 1999-2009

Founder's Message January 2009

Whew! It's hard to believe that it has been over 10 years since we made our first trip to Haiti in August 1998. I can assure you that we had absolutely no idea of what we were getting ourselves into when that first group of 15 or so hardy souls decided to see how we could help bring rehab to Haiti.

It was a cold, gray day in Salt Lake City on late February 1998. It was a day like most February days, when winter weather has worn thin and dreams of a hot sun, white sand, and blue ocean twirl and twist through our heads like the eddying snow flurries that whirled outside the hospital windows. In between PT sessions, team meetings and rehabilitation unit admissions, a small group of 3 or 4 sat staring bleakly out the window.

"Now is my chance!" I thought. "Hey, have any of you thought about going to do medical missionary work in. uh, the Caribbean?" (That I was thinking of Haiti, the western hemisphere's poorest country could always come later). Heads turned, chins perked, and eyes began to lose their dazed, glassiness, and show hints of tiny sparks.

I had them! "How about traveling to the Caribbean as a rehabilitation team to see what kind of rehab programs exist and how we can help?" I asked. Rehab professionals are the most caring and compassionate people I've ever known so I knew what the answer would be.

With the help of Susan Gleason, our unit's social worker, who could keep a hundred balls all in the air, in a few months we had a team of PT's, OT's, rehab nurses, translators, support staff, and one MD ready to go to Haiti in August. (August! What were we thinking?! It's hot enough in **Utah** in August. Haiti would be like a giant sauna in August!) But, by that time we had all spent too much time planning, had applied for vacation time and saved up to purchase our plane tickets, to abandon our trip now.

As the date of our departure approached, we got more and more excited about going to an exotic island in the Caribbean Sea to teach physical rehabilitation and treat adults and kids with physical disabilities. I may have glossed over the terrible working and living conditions, the lack of reliable electricity, and the heart wrenching poverty, but I figured we would all find out soon enough. We had made an arrangement to stay in a guesthouse next to a private hospital that had a wing of 25 - 30 disabled children and we planned to do medical and therapy evaluations, treat what we could, devise treatment plans for each child and teach the local caregivers how to follow them. We had a place to stay, appropriate patients to treat... what could go wrong? Haiti.

Three days before our trip we got a letter returning our deposit check saying we were no longer welcome to stay at the hospital's guesthouse and treat their patients! We were frantic! We had no idea what we had done or whom we might have insulted. We called the hospital again and again trying to get someone, anyone to give us an answer as to why our trip was ruined. Finally, we learned that the church in the US which supported the hospital feared that we were a religious group and we were really going to proselytize the patients at their hospital!

We learned two very important lessons from this setback that nearly doomed Healing Hands for Haiti before it even got started. First, our mission is to promote rehabilitation and only rehabilitation to whomever needs it regardless of color, creed, politics, religion or ability to pay. Second, in Haiti you must be prepared for anything because the only thing you can be sure of is that no matter how carefully you prepare and plan, you will have to change that plan drastically and often once you start dealing with the realities of the country.

From cutting up our beach chairs to make hand splints, to doing examinations in a the pitch black, to conducting a physical therapy clinic in a driving rainstorm as a giant tree cracks and falls narrowly missing two of our therapists, to going to customs and being told that it would cost \$40,000 to have our container of medical supplies released (we had less than \$4000 in the bank at the time) and returning each day and politely nagging until they got tired of us and released it without charging any duty - we have seen it all. And each team that goes from all over the U.S. and Canada could add its own experiences, most good.

Gina Ferris Duncan, the director of nursing at the hospital where we weren't welcome, took pity on us and arranged for us to stay in a nice hotel and helped keep our team's schedule busy with teaching, training and learning. At the end of an exhausting 10 days every one of us felt as though we had the experience of a lifetime. And every one of us couldn't wait to go back!

In 1999 we took 40 people with us and Healing Hands for Haiti International Foundation has continued to grow. That year, I remember driving the slow bumpy route up to Cap-Haitien with Susan Gleason and Travis Smith. For six hours we discussed plans, goals and dreams for the fledgling foundation. We had big dreams for Healing Hands. Why not dream big, for even our small goals seemed as unobtainable as our big dream of building and staffing Haiti's first freestanding rehabilitation center?

Thanks to many, many incredible, caring hardworking people from Canada, the US, Europe and from Haiti most of those dreams and goals from 10 years ago have not only been accomplished but also surpassed. With a committed capable board, and our new executive staff who are focused on improving operations, fundraising, and publicity - I have no doubt that we will accomplish our dream of building that rehabilitation center. And more importantly staffing that hospital with well-trained Haitian physicians, nurses and therapists who will take the lead in providing rehabilitation care for the physically disabled of Haiti.

My involvement with HHHIF has been one of the best experiences of my life. I am proud of the work we have accomplished. I am in awe of the many volunteers who pay their own way, use their precious vacation days and spend countless hours soliciting, categorizing and packing donations for our clinic, preparing lectures and training for our Haitian partners, and planning and carrying out publicity and fundraising activities to support our foundation, training programs, prosthetic shop, school reintegration program and clinics. The Healing Hands for Haiti International Foundation has grown beyond my grandest dreams in just 10 years and I am grateful to still be a part of it.

Jeff Randle, MD
Founder
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