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HEALING THE WOUNDS IN HAITI

Medical mission nurse assists quake victims

By Diane Freeby

SOUTH BEND — In the days and weeks following the disastrous earthquake that killed over 200,000 people in the impoverished nation of Haiti on Jan. 12, Dr. Scott Thomas and his wife Ann-Marie were waiting — waiting to hear when he might go there to help with medical relief.

Dr. Thomas is the director of trauma at Memorial Hospital in South Bend. He is a general and vascular surgeon there, and Ann-Marie, an operating room nurse, specializes in wound care.

Parishioners at Corpus Christi Parish, South Bend, where their two youngest attend grade school, the Thomas's have had an eye toward doing mission work after the children are grown. The earthquake in Haiti put those plans into motion much sooner than expected.

"It was always a question of whether or not Scott would go down," Ann-Marie told Today's Catholic. "He was also concerned that they have the right equipment. We have to know we can sterilize instruments. We have to know that we have an operating room, that we have an anesthesiologist ... because if we don't have that, we can't do anything. As it was, we had heard about all the amputations and surgeries being done without anesthesia. Scott said he couldn't be a part of that."

A group of 17 medical professionals from South Bend went to Haiti first, to scout out the situation and let Dr. Thomas know if he would be needed. Ann-Marie recalls getting marching orders with only a few hours notice.

"When they got down there they called and said, 'Well, we don't need you, Scott. We need Ann-Marie! They needed more nurses.'"

Six hours later, on Feb. 3, Ann-Marie was on her way to pick up supplies in Florida, then fly out to Haiti the next day. "I didn't sleep a wink most of the night in Florida," she continued, "but once I got on the plane ... once I had all the supplies with me and I had a plan, I thought I can do this. I mean, if these people can live through an earthquake, surely I can help."

There wasn't much time to dwell on anything after Ann-Marie arrived in Milot, a village 75 miles north of Port-au-Prince. The capital city was leveled, but Milot was relatively untouched. Milot was also home to Hospital Sacre Coeur, the only hospital left standing.

"The 10 mile drive from the airport to the hospital took an hour because the roads are that bad," said Ann-Marie, "and immediately what impressed me was the poverty. The heat and the poverty ... it's everywhere, and it was like that before the earthquake hit."

When she reached the compound, Ann-Marie observed volumes of people milling everywhere. She put on a pair of scrubs and went right to work, dressing wounds for the next six hours.



Ann-Marie Thomas, a nurse, assists those suffering in Haiti from the Jan. 12 earthquake.

"As we go up towards the hospital, I think we're going to a facility, a hospital," recalled Ann-Marie. "It's a 70-bed hospital ... but they had 400 patients. So the hospital was overflowing, and then across the dirt road from the hospital, instantly I can smell the latrine ... I can smell food, and I discover they're cooking food right next to where they're emptying the bed pans. I mean, it's just mind-blowing."

Ann-Marie described the military tents, with rows of cots filled with earthquake victims. Behind the tents, a school was converted into another shelter for patients.

"My first thoughts were a little bit of dismay at the overwhelming disaster that we were in," said Ann-Marie, who said she wondered at first how could God let this happen. "Yet, there was such a presence of grace about these people that I was just totally thrown. What struck me was how faithful these people were in all the people who had come to help them."

Ann-Marie says her background helped her to better serve. She trained with a religious order in Ireland, the Bon Secours Sisters, and refers to her nursing career as a vocation. The sisters' mission is to bring good help to those in need.

According to Ann-Marie, a typical day for her group in Haiti began around 5:30 a.m. After breakfast, they went to the tents and spent the morning dressing wounds and doing "whatever else needed to be done." She said they tried to see every patient in the dressing tent at least once a day.

"There was a really energetic group from South Bend and they just were fabulous. Surgeons put on gloves and got down and dirty like the nurses, doing dressings. There was no delineation of jobs ... it was a team effort. We had patients singing and laughing, carrying on. There was actually a lot of that. We kept it upbeat, getting the patients up out of bed and moving around."

Ann-Marie said they stopped for lunch around 1 p.m. She admitted living on power bars and Coke during the five days she served in Haiti, in an effort to avoid the stomach illnesses that were so prevalent. After lunch they went back to the tents, working until dinner at 7 p.m. Around 8 p.m., all the volunteers met to discuss how the day went and what they could improve.

"The whole time was just trying to stay on the mission at hand, and that was to make one patient comfortable and move on to the next. I carried in my bag of dressings a vial of morphine and some IV fluids. ... I would go around and give morphine in the morning and then 20 minutes later start in on the dressings."

Despite their best efforts, Ann-Marie said each day was "organized chaos."

"In one tent, we had a group of paraplegics. What will we do with them?" she wondered. "There is nowhere for them to go. They will eventually die. Coming to terms with that was very, very difficult. Just realizing they will die ... and they are people who wouldn't die if they were here. They would be rehabbed. That was very, very hard."

Still, Ann-Marie says she was "blown away" by the Haitian people's grace.

"They live in the grace of the moment that God gave them. There's none of this 'what are we going to do for dinner' because they're just living in the moment of what's handed to them. They are happy people. They know what's around the corner, and it's not good. I do believe they are very faithful and okay with the trust that they have. And I don't know if it's trust in God, but it certainly seemed like it."

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