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Blade Area



Article published January 14, 2010

Toledo area families seek news of survivors

By BRIDGET THARP
BLADE STAFF WRITER

The oldest sons adopted into the Frisch family huddled around a computer screen for news from their native Haiti Wednesday, and remained uncertain of the fate of their biological relatives the day after a devastating earthquake there.



Joe Frisch, left, and Fabenson Frisch, both 19, check for news in their bedroom that was decorated with a Haitian theme during the 'Extreme Makeover: Home Edition' in September, 2008.

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Thousands are presumed dead after a massive, magnitude-7 earthquake Tuesday that left the capital Port-au-Prince in ruins, toppled schools and hospitals, and crumbled roadways in the island nation.

E-mails and phone calls to family and friends went unanswered, the Frisch boys said, as the destruction caused by the quake limited communications.

The longer they watched, the worse it looked.

"It is a poor country, and this will make it worse," Fabenson Frisch, 19, said. "It will take years to rebuild."

Fabenson and his adopted brothers, Joe, 19, and Max, 18 were adopted from the same Haitian orphanage by Aaron and Jackie Frisch. The young men spent hours in the bedroom they share devouring online news reports about the quake. Enlarged graphic maps of their native country covered the walls of the basement room of the home rebuilt for the family of 13 in 2008 by the television program Extreme Makeover: Home Edition.

Five of the Frisches' 11 adopted children were from Haiti.

Max tried to look on the bright side. Being forced to rebuild could be "a chance to make things better," he said.

They kept their adopted brother, Charlie, 11, away from news reports because "the videos may be a shock for him," Fabenson said.

Nothing was heard from Joe's biological father, aunt, and sister, Fabenson's biological mother, brothers, and aunts, nor from Max's biological mother and step- father, they said.

"For them to sit here and know their entire extended family is there," their father, Mr. Frisch, said. "My heart just breaks for them. We just try to do what we can for them."

The news was better for J.J. Beaucejour, 22, a Haitian student at the University of Toledo who moved into the Frisch house in October. He learned secondhand that his father, a Haitian minister who heads an orphanage only a few miles from the epicenter, is safe.

Still, "every other minute, we're checking," Mr. Beaucejour said.

A local team sent to Haiti was safe but felt the quake from their post about 40 miles north of the epicenter, according to the Findlay organization, Mission Possible.

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A representative from the team e-mailed headquarters about an hour after the quake, said Trace Roth, director of finance and mission teams for Mission Possible.

The team includes three residents of Findlay, and others from Stow, Ohio; Grand Rapids, Mich.; Noblesville, Ind., and Richland Center, Wis.

The team landed in Port-au-Prince Saturday to provide what was expected to be a seven-day series of health seminars for island natives, but will instead redirect their energy to relief efforts, Mr. Roth said.

"God kind of directed them to be there," Mr. Roth said.

When the Rev. Sammy Adebiji heard the news, he couldn't help but see the faces of the 60 orphans he had visited with only a week before - including the one he hopes to adopt.

"That's the part that makes it hard, the faces and names of the kids we were with," he said. "It makes it a little close to home."

He led a group of about 30 University of Toledo students that returned just days ago from volunteering about three miles from the epicenter of the earthquake, said Mr. Adebiji of Vineyard Church of Toledo.

The students from Mr. Adebiji's church group spent time at the orphanage run by Mr. Beaucejour's father in Leogane, Haiti. They gathered at his home when the news broke Tuesday and "prayed and cried and tried to wrap our heads around what's going on," Mr. Adebiji said.

"It was just a shock, you really don't believe it," Mr. Adebiji said.

During his recent trip there, Mr. Adebiji and his wife, Ashley, started the process of adopting a Haitian girl.

Though a staff member of the orphanage contacted the Dayton-area headquarters of Children of Promise International to confirm the safety of staff and children at the orphanage about 10 minutes after the quake struck, they haven't heard anything since, Mr. Adebiji said.

"It's literally like someone sucked the life out of you. We can't reach anyone out there," said Vonda Hogle, a pastor at Vineyard who traveled with the group to Haiti.

Joe Sarnes, a second-grade teacher at Fort Meigs Elementary in Perrysburg, returned in November from a trip to the Brad Reddick School in Savanette, Haiti, to help set up computers for the Perrysburg nonprofit Missions International of America. He said he wasn't surprised to see so many toppled buildings in the country, where homes are often "shacks made of corrugated metal built of whatever they can find."

"It's not like California, where they actually build buildings to withstand earthquakes. The construction down there certainly isn't going to withstand anything like this," Mr. Sarnes said.

His second graders - who donated money and crafted friendship bracelets for the Haitian children he would meet - asked questions about the earthquake.

"They're second graders. There's only so much you can share about what's going on. You don't want to frighten them."

Jan Meier-Nielsen of Perrysburg co-founded the organization with her husband and said she will not abandon plans to travel to Haiti in two weeks to install donated solar panels at the Brad Reddick School. By then, she said, the people who live closest to the school will be in dire need of food and supplies. Schoolchildren there are fed a muffin each day, and "for most of our kids that is the only food they get," she said.

She was grateful to learn that the quake left the school standing, but knows little else about the structural damage and injuries of those nearby.

"We have very little information," Mrs. Meier-Nielsen said. "It's just a huge black hole of information."

Information from the Associated Press was used in this report.

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