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Volunteers in Haiti return safely after quake

By MARGARET DWIGGINS

Family Editor

All of the area volunteers who were caught in Haiti when the island country was hit by a massive earthquake last week are home safely.

Volunteers with Pandora-based VOSH-Ohio (Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity) and Findlay-based Mission Possible arrived in the United States on Saturday, the day they originally planned to return, but under very different circumstances.

Barbara Plaugher and her husband Arliss, of Bluffton, serving with VOSH-Ohio, found transportation out of the airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on Friday. After many hours of waiting they boarded a U.S. military cargo plane which took them as far as McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey. The couple then arranged travel back to Ohio and returned to Bluffton late Saturday night.

Meanwhile, a team of volunteers serving in Haiti with Mission Possible found their way home on a commercial flight from the Dominican Republic. They left early Saturday morning and arrived at Detroit Metro Airport that afternoon.

VOSH-Ohio

Barbara Plaugher said she and her husband have volunteered all over the world for VOSH-Ohio, but this was their first visit to Haiti. The group collects eyeglasses and distributes them in third-world countries.

Plaugher, semi-retired from Blanchard Valley Hospital's Bluffton campus, was serving as team leader, and as she always does before leaving on a mission trip, had registered the team's passport numbers with the U.S. Embassy. That proved to be the team's ticket out. Plaugher's daughter received a call at 2 a.m. Friday that the U.S. Embassy was arranging transport to the United States.

Plaugher said her group arrived in Haiti Jan. 9 and began seeing eye patients on Jan. 10 at the Society of Our Lady Mission in Hinche, about 75 miles from the quake's epicenter.

At the time the earthquake hit last Tuesday, Plaugher said everyone except her husband

was outside. Her husband thought he noticed objects on the wall swaying, but nobody really felt the earthquake. All, however, experienced extreme vertigo, although they didn't realize what was happening.

"Everyone was hanging on to each other ... we all had this dizziness," Plaughter said.

The team, which also included volunteers from elsewhere in Ohio and Chicago, later rented a van and headed toward Port-au-Prince, not knowing if roads would be passable but feeling they had no other choice.

To say that they encountered chaos would be "an understatement," Plaughter said.

"The traffic jam was massive," she said.

Trucks overflowing with people were exiting the city in great numbers.

"People were sitting on top, hanging on the side, trucks were completely full on the inside. Everyone was exiting the city, they had chickens, animals, furniture, suitcases, you name it," she said.

Although the airport in Port-au-Prince sustained heavy damage during the quake, it has been in operation with military and other relief planes flying in and out. The building was surrounded by U.S. soldiers.

Once the VOSH group reached the airport, Plaughter said they felt safe, but they still had no idea how long they'd be there or where they'd be taken.

The group waited in a long line outside the airport for about five hours, then another five hours inside the terminal. They boarded a military plane bound for New Jersey at about 10:30 p.m. Friday, a cargo plane that had delivered trucks and heavy equipment on its flight to Haiti.

Plaughter said the only time she felt nervous was at the compound in Hinche the night before the group left Haiti. She was awakened at about 3 a.m. by the sounds of loud drums and chanting which seemed to be coming from the direction of the Dominican Republic. The neighboring country is not always friendly with Haiti, she said, and the border is not open.

Other than that discomfort, however, Plaughter said she never feared for her safety, although she takes her role as team leader very seriously.

"I think of the responsibility of a mother to her children when I take a team out. We had some questions as to how we were going to go out, but I was emphatic that we needed to leave," Plaughter said.

She said she began to wonder later if she'd made the right decision but everything worked out in the end.

Plaughter said a planned VOSH mission trip to Peru in May has been canceled so volunteers can regroup. Team members decided to leave much of their personal luggage

in Haiti so they could travel lighter. The team also left about 3,000 pairs of eyeglasses and a great deal of equipment such as eye charts, extension cords and frame benders which will have to be replaced.

Mission Possible

Julie Bishop of Findlay, who headed the Mission Possible team, said the team did not encounter much chaos leaving Haiti, although it did witness the aftermath of the earthquake.

Mission Possible operates six Christian schools in Haiti and gives health seminars.

The group of 17 Mission Possible volunteers from Findlay, Pandora and Bloomdale, as well as elsewhere in Ohio and Michigan, left Haiti on Thursday for the Dominican Republic. Travel arrangements were made from Findlay by Bishop's husband, Kurt, Mission Possible's president, and Trace Roth, the organization's finance director.

"We met some congestion but the situation was not like it is now. We didn't see any violence. We saw people walking with their belongings on their head, heading out (away from Port-au-Prince). We saw things that had collapsed. We had to skirt Port-au-Prince, but we could see it burning from across the water," Bishop said.

It took two hours for the group to reach the Dominican Republic border, where it was met by Mission Possible staff members from the organization's operation in Barahona, Dominican Republic. They traveled another two hours to Barahona with a motorcycle escort.

Bishop said her team, which did feel Tuesday's earthquake and its aftershocks, was most worried about the threat of tsunami, as the mission center where the group was working is located on the beach. Aftershocks were felt for about 16 hours after the quake, but tsunami warnings were lifted soon after the quake.

Nancy Rook of Bloomdale, a nurse at Faith Academy in Findlay, was one of the volunteers with the Mission Possible team. When the quake occurred Tuesday, Rook and some other nurses had been organizing medical supplies at the Mission Possible center in Montois, merging supplies the Findlay team had brought with existing supplies and realizing they had more supplies than their storage area could hold.

"We knew we had an abundance and we knew we were going to have to condense so we could hold it in our little supply area. When that happened (the earthquake) we knew God had us bring that in for a reason," Rook said.

Rook said she and other volunteers took excess supplies to a hospital in St. Marc on Wednesday, where hospital staff were delighted to receive them. By then, earthquake victims were laid out in the hospital "wall-to-wall," Rook said.

A doctor at the hospital asked if the nurses could come back and help, but by then travel arrangements had been made for the group to leave Haiti the next morning.

"... We went with our team to the border," Rook said. "That's the first time we encountered destruction. It reminded you of a tornado. One house would be destroyed, and two shacks next to it would be untouched. Some walls were down, some whole houses were down. It was like there was no rhyme or reason, it seemed strange how some of the more shack-like houses were standing," Rook said.

Roads were "flooded" with refugees, she said. People were "carrying next to nothing, probably all they had left, to who knows where, with hopelessness on their faces," she said.

At Barahona, about a four-hour drive from Port-au-Prince, hospitals were just as crowded, with refugees looking for help anywhere they could.

Rook said the only time she felt concern was on the trip to Barahona when the group encountered gridlock near Port-au-Prince. The women and the men were traveling separately, and when traffic stopped they sat in their vehicles with the windows rolled up. However, their motorcycle escort led them through most of the chaos.

Rook said this was her second trip to Haiti, although this was the first time she went in a medical capacity. The team was there to lead health seminars for pregnant women and had brought several birthing kits with them.

Asked if she would ever return to Haiti after this experience, Rook said, "Absolutely."

"You understand the people there are very strong people, they're very hospitable. I went last year with a lot of misconceptions of what Haitian people are like and now realize they're not like that. You realize they're desperate -- we don't know what we would do if we were so desperate to feed our families, even to have water," she said.

"Mission Possible has great representation there and they run things well. I trust the nationals that work for them, I really felt safe. When we were there we had the Findlay team back here and I felt comfortable they were doing everything they could to see we got out safely. I just trusted in that," she said.

Rook says she wishes she could have stayed to help, but is thankful that they were able to leave when they did.

"If not, who knows when we could have gotten home," she said. "We knew God was in control."

Donations accepted

Mission Possible is accepting monetary donations which will be used to rebuild a damaged Mission Possible school in Haiti; for food, water and medical assistance for Haitians affected by the earthquake who are being treated at hospitals in St. Marc, Haiti, and in Barahona, Dominican Republic; and to continue to feed the children who benefit from Mission Possible's ongoing mission work in Haiti.

Donations may be sent to the Mission Possible office, 124 W. Front St.

VOSH is in need of eyeglasses, especially bifocals, to replenish its supply. Donations are accepted at the sorting center in the basement of Pandora First Methodist Church on Ohio 12, Pandora. Eyeglasses can also be put into any Findlay Lions Club-sponsored box which are located at eye doctors' and opticians' offices.

Monetary donations may be made to the mission in Hinche, where the VOSH team was working when the earthquake hit. Donations may be sent to Haiti Mission, P.O. Box 1400, Abbeville, LA 70511.

Donations should be earmarked as to whether they are to go to earthquake victims or to help the Hinche Mission with food and fuel, which has already doubled in price. Write in the memo line of the check "Fr. Meaux's Haiti Mission."

On the Net:

ourmissionispossible.org

www.willard-oh.com/voshohio/

solthaitimission.org

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