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by Tim Troglen

Reporter

Stow -- Vince and Lee Petno are back home watching the ground slowly emerge from the white of a January thaw.

That's quite different from Jan. 12 when they were in Haiti as a 7-magnitude earthquake hit, killing thousands and leaving the streets of the island country littered with bodies and collapsed homes.

The Petnos, along with their daughter, Julie Bishop, and her husband, Kurt, were in Lanzoac, Haiti, about 60 miles north of the earthquake zone, to do mission work with Ohio-based Mission Possible, which operates six schools and several churches in and around Lanzoac.

Their son, David, lives in Hudson.

While most of the schools and churches operated by Mission Possible in Haiti were unscathed, Vince said, one school in the remote area of LaHatte, which usually houses about 400 students, was destroyed.

However, Vince said since the students only attend classes in the morning, the school was empty shortly after 4 p.m. when the earthquake hit.

"We were scheduled to go there the next day to take pictures of the kids," Vince, 68, said.

Vince said there was no indication that anything was wrong on the day of the earthquake. He said it was "a beautiful crystal clear day, and the waves were gently hitting the shore as usual."

Vince said he and his wife, Lee, 66, were inside their quarters when he heard a "loud noise behind me that sounded like an automatic washing machine when it is in the spin cycle and off balance and moving across the floor."

"The walls started rippling and the columns were shaking," he said. "All of us stayed in the buildings longer than we should have."

Vince said the mission team was trying to figure out what happened when they determined it was an earthquake.

But with cell phone service knocked out, the team had to rely on satellite Internet service to find out the extent of the destruction.

However, Vince, who has been to Haiti several times, said he did not look at the pictures of the crumbled buildings and bodies laying in the streets.

"I'm a physician," he said. "I didn't look at any pictures -- I just had a feeling what it was going to look like. I shut it out and just did what we needed to do."

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The mission team did "feel a number of aftershocks for a few hours," he said, but the group was housed in buildings which were built to withstand hurricanes. At one point, he said, the mission teams formulated a plan to move to higher ground after a tsunami watch was issued. However, the watch was canceled a few hours later.

Vince said there were five rooms of supplies, both medical and non-medical, at the mission center. The group, which also included a doctor and three nurses, "put together kits that could be used in disaster relief."

Some of the items prepared before the trip were 300 birthing kits, which included blankets, soap and diapers, Vince said. The items were taken at night by some of the team to St. Marc Hospital, an hour north, to be used for incoming casualties.

And while many of the team wanted to stay and help, Vince said, Mission Possible leadership "felt it necessary to for us to exit as soon as possible."

"We were scheduled to leave Haiti Jan. 16 from Port Au Prince, and it became immediately evident that that route would not be an option," Vince said. "There were many, many events that happened where we could see God's hand so clearly as it related to our team."

And, according to Vince, it was God and good team leadership which got the group out and back home safely, via the Dominican Republic to a Mission Possible School in Batey.

"I left my heart there -- my heart has been there for a long time," Vince said of Haiti.

Vince said when he and Lee arrived at the Akron Canton Airport, they beat David and his family by a few minutes. Their family greeted them with signs that read "Welcome home Granddad and Grammy."

"You can imagine our joy to be with family, but our sorrow when we reflect what we left and what is ahead for the country of Haiti to try to rebuild to where it was in Port-Au-Prince," he said.

David, who is an insurance broker, said he was at work Jan. 12 when he received an e-mail from his parents, letting the family know there had been an earthquake, but they were fine.

"Dad goes down there a couple of times a year," David said.

David has been to the island, too, and said the people are both "wonderful and very friendly." They are receptive to the missionaries and the help offered, he added.

Vince, a retired cardiologist, said he plans to go back to Haiti to help the people.

And since arriving home, Vince has not watched the news reports.

"I don't want to see it because my heart is hurting enough," he said.

Vince said unlike hospitals in the U.S., when a person is admitted in Haiti "the family has to take care of you, bring you food and pay for the medicine." But now there are thousands of people with no one to look out for them.

Initially hesitant to be interviewed for this story, Vince said he and his wife are not deserving of special credit or recognition.

The real story is about people helping people and doing what God has instructed them to do, he said.

"Now the mission begins," he said, quoting from the back of a shirt given to the team on their final day in Haiti.

E-mail: ttroglen@recordpub.com

Phone: 330-688-0088 ext. 3146



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