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Area relief groups go all out for Haiti

Without quick assistance, shortage of food predicted to be next disaster



Jan Meier-Nielsen, who with her husband started Missions International of America, works the phones and e-mail from her Perrysburg home to help her husband in Haiti.
(THE BLADE/LISA DUTTON)

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By **JC REINDL**
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Jan Meier-Nielsen wants to apologize that her Christmas decorations are still up.

As the co-founder with her husband of Missions International of America, a charitable organization focused on Haiti medical aid and education, her attention and energy have been elsewhere the past two weeks - a good 2,000 miles south.

Her husband, Dr. Jay Nielsen, a family practice physician, left their Perrysburg home on Monday on a relief mission to assist the thousands of survivors of the Jan. 12 earthquake who have poured into the city of Les Cayes on Haiti's southwestern coast.

The city is not far from the Brad Reddick School and orphanage, which the couple founded in 2006, and enrolls 309 Haitian children in kindergarten through the sixth grade.

Since Dr. Nielsen's departure, the energetic Mrs. Meier-Nielsen, who is a licensed clinical counselor with her own business, has stayed connected to her computer and telephone at all hours, providing much of the logistical support for her husband's humanitarian mission.

She has coordinated everything from private aircraft to 1,000-pound food supplies - all while working in the shadow of a Christmas tree that managed to outlast the holidays.

So please, be kind and divert your eyes from the lingering garland and still-hanging mistletoe. Those stockings will be coming down too, just as soon as more Haitians have access to medical care and steady meals.

"I'm really sorry," Mrs. Meier-Nielsen said Friday. "I stayed up last night e-mailing senators and Bill Clinton ... right now I'm in charge of putting 2,500 pounds of food on a plane."

The Niensens are among a handful of relief teams from northwest Ohio and southeast Michigan working to give direct, on-the-ground assistance to citizens of the island nation after the devastating 7.0 earthquake that centered on the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince.

Members of a 23-person medical team coordinated by ISOH/IMPACT, a Waterville-based charity, spent last week helping quake victims in Port-au-Prince as well as at a hospital about 15 miles from the capital.

The group, which includes the charity's president, Linda Greene, is to return to Ohio tomorrow.

A few northwest Ohioans were in Haiti when the quake struck.

Julie Bishop, whose husband, Kurt Bishop, is president of the Findlay-based Mission Possible ministry, was visiting one of the ministry's six Haitian schools when the ground began shaking and the trees started swaying.

Back home since Jan. 16, Mrs. Bishop recalled in an interview how she also heard a loud noise during the earthquake that to her sounded like an airplane landing. To some of her students, it sounded like "elephants crashing through the roof."

The school, about 40 miles from the epicenter, suffered little damage and no injuries. However, another Mission Possible school closer to the epicenter partially collapsed and must be rebuilt. Mrs. Bishop said she is grateful to God no one was inside that school during the quake.

"That is a morning school and it was an afternoon earthquake," Mrs. Bishop said. "We are so thankful. It would have been a very different story if we had to tell sponsors that their children had died in an earthquake."

HELPING HANDS IN HAITI

Local charitable organizations working in Haiti are on the Internet at these sites:

- Missions International of America: missionsinternationalofamerica.com
- Mission Possible: ourmissionispossible.org
- ISOH/IMPACT: isohimpact.org

Still, many of her Mission Possible students are missing relatives who were in Port-au-Prince.

"There was no communication out of the capital in Port-au-Prince, so the only thing you could do was go look and see if you can find your family in the big city," she said. "I can't even imagine what that must be like."

Mrs. Bishop said she and several nurses on her team, including Nancy Rook of Bloomdale, Ohio, in southern Wood County, visited a Dominican Republic hospital after the earthquake that was filled with quake victims from Port-au-Prince.

The Dominican Republic shares the islands of Hispaniola with Haiti.

Mission Possible is now using its donations to provide much-needed supplies for overburdened hospitals in the middle of the crisis.

"Haiti is the poorest country in the hemisphere, and they already had it so hard," Mrs. Bishop said. "So for them to have this happen too, is just really hard to think about."

Mrs. Meier-Nielsen was put to work just moments after she arrived home after dropping off her husband at Detroit Metropolitan Airport.

Dr. Nielsen was scheduled to fly into Montego Bay, Jamaica, and ultimately into Les Cayes, Haiti, by a private plane.

Dr. Nielsen phoned her about 6 a.m., before his first flight left.

"He calls and says, 'Can you get me 1,000 pounds of food into Montego Bay by noon?'" Mrs. Meier-Nielsen recalled. "Sure, honey."

She proceeded to spend the better part of the morning leaving many phone messages for food aid but not receiving any calls back.

Eventually she located a sympathetic contact in Jamaica via the Internet. The contact got in touch with the Center for Short Term Missions, a division of the U.S. Center for World Mission, which quickly donated the food via its contacts in Jamaica.

By 1:30 p.m., the nearly 1,000 pounds of flour, sugar, yeast, baking powder, and rice were loaded in the private plane Dr. Nielsen would ride.

By 4:30 p.m., the food was delivered to the school and orphanage.

"It was amazing," Mrs. Meier-Nielsen said.

While Les Cayes was not directly affected by the earthquake, Dr. Nielsen described in e-mails how bus loads of refugees have arrived in the city fleeing the capital's devastation.

"The people arriving packed in cargo trucks are breaking my heart," he wrote.

"They are shattered-looking. They are dehydrated, exhausted, frightened, displaced, devoid of possession."

Dr. Nielsen said he is helping out at a refugee camp in Les Cayes that's set up on a soccer field. He also described how the area's hospitals are being overwhelmed with injured quake survivors.

And street commerce has all but ground to a halt in Les Cayes, he wrote.

"The banks are closed. The stores are closed. There is no security but all is quiet," Dr. Nielsen wrote. "All filling stations are locked up. Food is running out and so is time."

Mrs. Meier-Nielsen, who returned from a Haiti trip in November, said that her husband expressed in a recent satellite phone conversation that he's worried about the near-term possibility of hunger in outlying cities such as Les Cayes.

"Haiti is totally dependent on Port-au-Prince - totally dependent - so when Port-au-Prince is cut off, nothing gets to these other towns," she said. "So it could be only a matter of time before everyone is starving as well."

The Niensens' mission is focused on getting food flown in to the city's refugee camp, as well as a general food distribution setup in downtown. Their cost for an air shipment from Jamaica to Les Cayes' small airport is about \$2,000, so Missions International is soliciting earthquake relief donations, Mrs. Meier-Nielsen said.

"The plane will fly everyday from Jamaica to Cayes from Jamaica to Cayes until we run out of money.

What we're looking to do right now is feed people before the violence starts. The people are orderly, but they won't be much longer if the food doesn't get there," she said. "It's another disaster waiting to happen if we can't do more."

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