

The outpouring of compassion is amazing

Gerry Straub Tom Roberts | Jan. 23, 2010



Victims of Haiti's earthquake wait in line to get water in Port-au-Prince Jan. 21. (CNS photo/Eliana Aponte, Reuters)

Haiti Dispatches No. 2

PORT AU PRINCE, Haiti -- On the second day of his stay in Haiti, filmmaker Gerry Straub was able to get a view of the vastness of the devastation in Port au Prince, a spectacle that he had heard about and witnessed on television via aerial shots and close-ups, but the reality of which was beyond his imagining.

And he continued to witness close up the courage and endless work of medical volunteers -- doctors, nurses, physicians? assistants -- from around the globe, as they attempted desperately in the worst circumstances to treat endless streams of patients, not always successfully. When they weren't working in the jury-rigged operating rooms and emergency rooms and makeshift wards out on sidewalks and lawns, he saw them working on fixing a door and loading and unloading supplies. There is no medical hierarchy in Haiti, he said, everyone pitches in to do whatever needs to be done.

In the midst of it all -- the "organized chaos" that he experienced the first day -- there was a further aftershock that sent shivers of fear through everyone. It was smaller than the 6.1 magnitude aftershock that shook the city earlier in the week, "but it definitely got everyone's attention."

Straub was able to hitch a ride on day two with Dr. Mike Fishell, an anesthesiologist from Las Vegas, and a Haitian driver, and they made their way to another facility, Adventist Hospital of Haiti, described online as a 70-bed facility with modern operating suites. It was shaken by the earthquake and overwhelmed in the first few days of the disaster. Straub said Fishell visited briefly, bringing supplies and inquiring what kind of help the facility might need.

The Adventist facility has far more property than the first hospital, and patients were being treated throughout the grounds. Because it is located closer to the center of the city, it was inundated with enormous numbers of injured, he said. Later in the day Straub returned to Haitian Community Hospital, where he arrived Jan. 22.

"On the way to Adventist Hospital, we took a tour down town," he said, "and the number of collapsed buildings

was just unbelievable. A school building was pancaked, he said, and he was told the bodies of at least 50 people were still inside a week and a half after it collapsed. Most people in the vicinity were wearing some sort of mask or covering over their faces, he said, and the doctor confirmed that the stench heavy in the air was that of decaying flesh.

"The downtown is totally collapsed and tent cities are springing up all over the city," Straub said.

At one point, Straub filmed a bus leaving the city jammed with people trying to get away from Port au Prince.

The intensity of the situation boiled over in one episode back at Haitian Community Hospital. Straub said a nurse came running into the common room where medical personnel keep their personal belongings and where Straub had slept the previous night. She was screaming she needed towels and water. They gathered towels and Straub showed her where there was some running water. They warmed the towels in a microwave and then headed to one of the wards to wrap a teenage boy, whose fever had spiked, in the warm towels. While he was being treated, there was a life and death emergency in a nearby bed. A woman was failing and the doctors rushed to try to resuscitate her and worked on her for some time. One of the doctors became angry that Straub was present and kicked him out of the room. The woman died.

Straub, discussing the situation over the phone with me, said the tension is always present in such situations -- recording the reality of a disaster, where life and death situations are constant and where death, indeed, is too much part of the story. He said he was later assured by several of the medical personnel present that they were confident he was there not to sensationalize the moment, but to record as many of its aspects as possible, and he was told that the offended doctor later was convinced of the worth of Straub's efforts.

Straub said he was so unsettled by the incident he began relating it to a doctor from the island of St. Thomas, and the doctor responded: "Let me tell you a story."

He told Straub that he had arrived immediately following the quake to join an associate. He said he walked through the front door of the hospital and was immediately pulled into a triage room where doctors were trying to resuscitate a young boy who was in septic shock. A doctor decided to declare the boy dead but others were urging him to continue to try to resuscitate. Finally, the doctor from St. Thomas told Straub, the physician overseeing the effort said, "even if we manage to revive him, there is nothing to sustain him."

The newly arrived doctor had just left that triage scene when he saw his friend rushing into the operating room. He went along. In December of 2009, less than four weeks before the powerful earthquake destroyed Port-au-Prince, Straub's San Damiano Foundation spent 8 days filming in the capital city, with a special focus on the massive slum of Cite Soleil, where more than a quarter of a million people live in unthinkably squalor and deprivation. No running water, no electricity, no sewers...nothing but endless misery.

Straub said it was impossible to keep count of the numbers of children and adults he's seen in and around the hospital with missing limbs, amputations, the doctors say, that were necessary because it had taken so long for patients to reach the hospital that crushed limbs had become gangrenous and irreparable. Besides intense poverty, the slum is riddled with violence.

Amid it all, said Straub, "It is amazing to see the outpouring of compassion. To me, that's the real beauty within this bleak world: nobody wants to be pampered, nobody is pulling superior attitude. They're just working. They're living on power bars and Gatorade that they brought in with them. There is very little other food."

In the Haitian Community Hospital, only one toilet is working and there is running water in only a few places, he said. At one point, nurses and doctors, including surgeons, were lined up 12 deep waiting to take a shower.

[Tom Roberts is NCR editor at large. Gerry Straub is a filmmaker, who in December was in Haiti working on a documentary titled "Angels of Compassion: the Luminous Force of Intentional Kindness." He returned to Haiti Jan. 21 for more filming. While there, he filed reports for NCR by phone.]

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For more information on the foundation Straub created, The San Damiano Foundation in Burbank, Calif., and to read about and order his films, please see www.sandamianofoundation.org [6].

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