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It's the heart that makes the ministry

Joan Chittister | Aug. 31, 2010 From Where I Stand

There are ministries. And there are ministries.

Some ministries in life a person can spend a lifetime planning. Like how to become a paramedic or how to join the fire department or how to go about being an advocate for people in need. In all those ways, and many more like them, some special kinds of people set out to serve those who need a hand up in hard times or continuing support even in good times. Those positions we institutionalize. Those things the rest of us take for granted these others will do. These people we call the professional guardians of a society.

But there are other kinds of ministry in life, equally important to many but modeled by few. These are the ministries we never consciously seek out ourselves but that seem to seek us out on their own. Then they erupt in us when we least expect it.

This is a story about that second kind of human being, the ones who in times of dire need respond in unique ways -- in ministries without definition, outside the boundaries of institutionalized services, beyond anyone?s assumption that they should. These people we call the conscience of the society.

Lopi LaRoe, artist and printmaker in her soul, New York television and theater stagehand on her tax form, sat like the rest of us and watched her television set in horror as the picture of an epic earthquake in Haiti unfolded in front of her eyes.

For days afterward, everywhere Lopi went, she went haunted by those images, pursued by the pain of them. She was plagued by the awareness that untold amounts of pain and suffering were now raining down on the poorest people in the Western Hemisphere. She was tormented by the very thought of a people who had already suffered more pain, more poverty, more desolation, more rejection than most people would ever know. Most of all, she was goaded by the look in the eyes of the children, the orphans old and new, for whom there was no one to cover them at night from the pain of the days to come.

Unlike most of her world that long before had become inured to sufferings they could do nothing about, Lopi stood one night in the midst of the castaway materials of stage sets, materials that a people living in the open rubble of a ruined society could certainly have used for shelter. ?I got angry,? she says. ?Why weren?t we meeting the immediate needs of these people: something to eat, a bed to sleep in??

She made up her mind, then and there, that she had to do something. Otherwise, she would never be able to get those faces out of her mind. After all, she says, she had grown up being taken by her family to peace protests and public demonstrations. She learned young that, however little it might seem in the light of the great corporate aid organizations of the world, she herself would have to do something to impact the life of at least one person there.

So she did.

Lopi LaRoe designed a geodesic dome in which Haitian orphans could be safe from endless tons of rain and mud. Domes that would be cheap to make, easy to build, simple to ship, elemental to assemble on the spot. Domes that could be raised in days rather than the weeks, months or years that housing projects would take. Domes where children would have dry nights, warm beds and one another for security.

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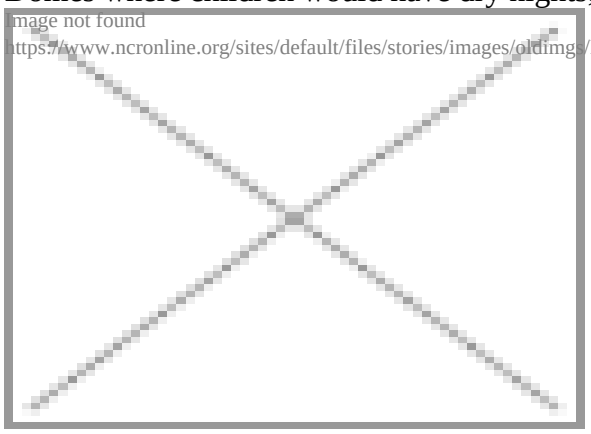

Why did she do it? ?I lived in a log cabin as a child,? she said. ?We had no electricity, no water. We were part of the ?back to the land movement? and I knew how it felt to walk through mud and get to school dirty.?

One woman with an idea turned to her friends for help and found a city full of the openhearted and willing who were too far away to do anything major about such a problem, perhaps, but were too close to it as human beings to even think of doing nothing at all: Laidman Fabrications provided free frames to bring her prototype to life, Turtle and Hughes donated the metal struts. Sperry Sails supplied the covers close to cost. And Will Etundi, a party promoter, threw a party that in one night brought in $22,000 to provide the shipping and handling costs around the edges.

Then, in Haiti, Lopi went for weeks from person to person, official to official, begging anyone who would listen to discharge the domes that lay ignored at the port. Other shipments into Haiti -- deliveries that paid the large custom payments the government needed -- were being released before the domes the children needed.

Now, after months of frustration, those 10 domes were finally going up in Haiti in mid-August.

Finally, thanks to one woman, and all of those who decide to go on supporting her attempt to raise the $4,000 it will take to buy the 100 beds and 100 hammocks these domes can hold, there will be 200 dry sleeping places for orphans in earthquake-devastated Haiti.

?What did this project do to you?? I asked her. Her answer sounded like a ministry in the making. ?The project changed me,? she said. ?I have more resolve about the future than I?ve ever had in my life. I learned patience in Haiti because in Haiti nothing happens quickly. I also learned that gender roles in Haiti are right out of the ?50s and women must be empowered.?

So, on Aug. 19, with a crew of women as well as men, more black than white, more Haitian than American, Lopi herself trained this group -- and paid them -- to raise the domes that will keep their homeless children

warm and safe and sheltered from the weather. Then she?ll go back to her life in New York.

Indeed, there are ministries and there are ministries.

From where I stand, it is clear that this one we are all being invited to be part of so that both Lopi and the children can get on with theirs: whatever that may be, wherever it may take them, whether they plan it or -- like this one -- it simply captures their hearts.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a frequent NCR contributor. Her monthly Web column, From Where I Stand, can be found on NCRonline.org.]

Editor's Note (Sept. 1): For more information about the 'Domes for Haiti' project you can visit the Web site here [1]. For more information on Lopi LaRoe you can visit her photography website here [2].

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